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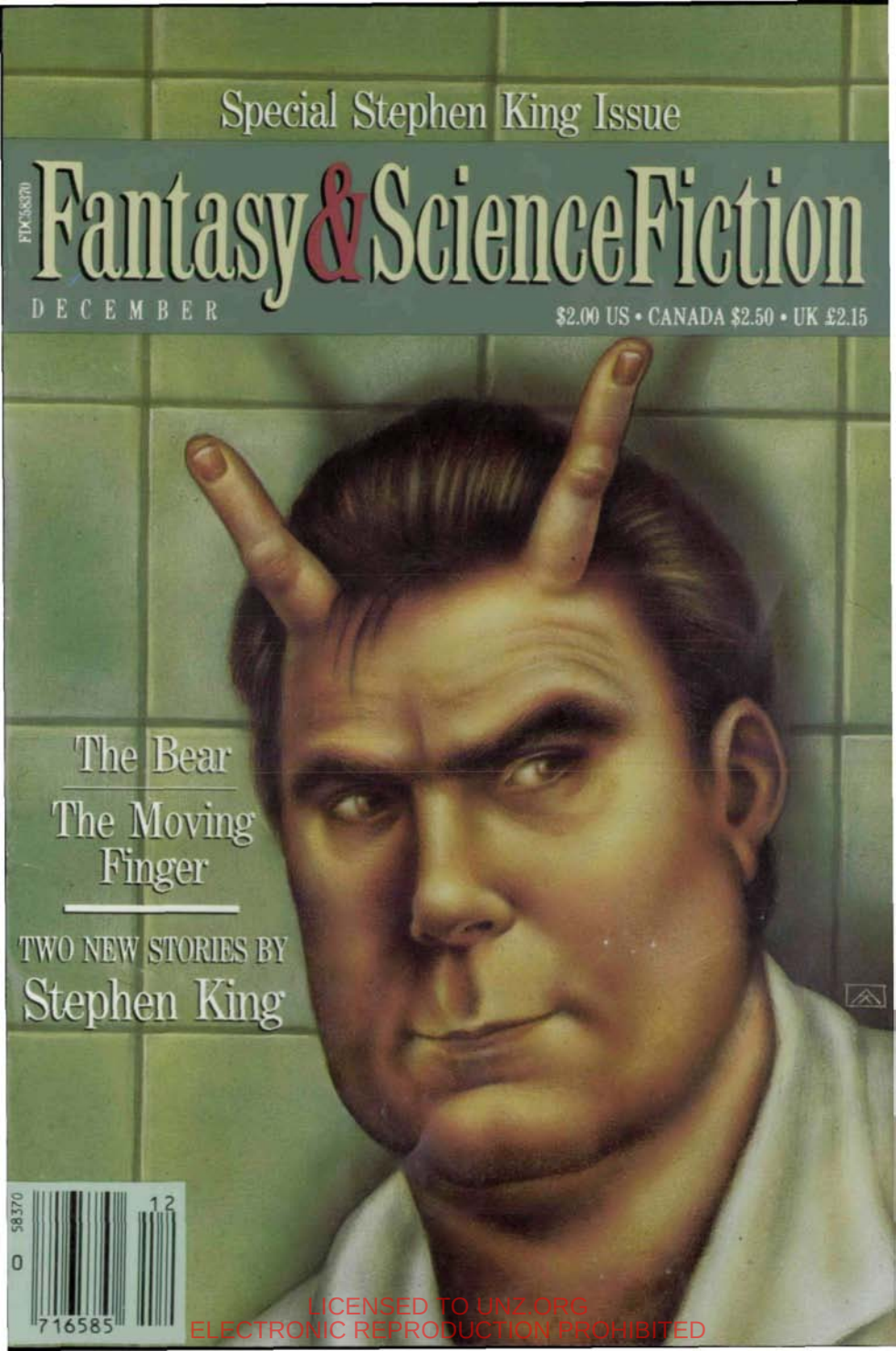

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The Moving Finger

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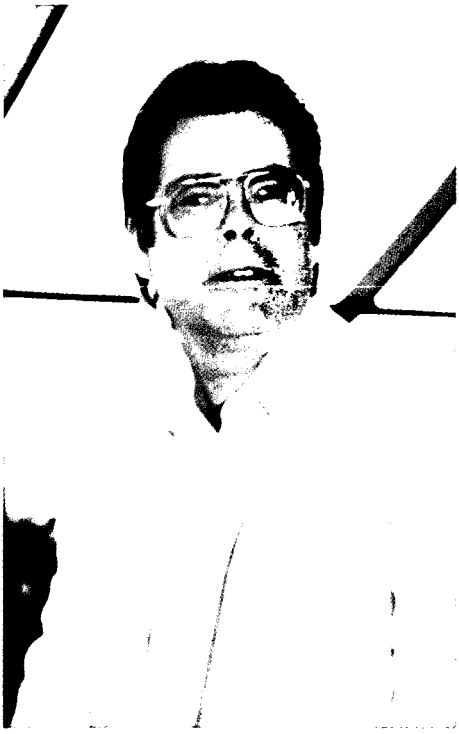

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy&ScienceFiction

DECEMBER • Stephen King Issue

SPECIAL STEPHEN KING SECTION

THE MOVING FINGER	8	**Stephen King**
STEPHEN KING	44	**Algis Budrys**
STEPHEN KING: BIBLIOGRAPHY	56	**Marsha De Filippo**
THE BEAR	61	**Stephen King**

SHORT STORIES

VINDOLANDA IN WINTER	96	**S. Newman**
THE BOOT	109	**Paul Di Filippo**
REFLECTION IN A WINDOW	124	**Ronald Anthony Cross**
BEHIND THE BARRIER	141	**Stephen Kraus**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR	89	**Orson Scott Card**
SCIENCE: Trapping the Rainbow	131	**Isaac Asimov**
INDEX TO VOLUME 79	160	

CARTOONS: S. HARRIS (123), HENRY MARTIN (130)

COVER BY ANITA KUNZ

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In This Issue

UP FRONT, in this special issue, I make two admissions. Like many who read for a living, I frequently don't finish books, reading only enough to get the idea and bowing to the pressure to move along to something better. Second, I don't have much fondness or patience for novel-length horror* and usually bail out not long after the slashing starts.

The question is then: why have I read every word of every Stephen King novel (with the exceptions of *It*, somehow missed, and the collaborative *The Talisman*, never finished)? And further, why do I remember them all, and rather vividly, and even recall some of the circumstances of their reading? There was *that* holiday, *this* illness.

They do stick in the mind, his books, like old friends, and perhaps that's part of the answer. Other parts may be found in Algis Budrys's essay, when he talks about the different voices of Stephen King, or the fact that he is not the same as Peter Straub or Dean Koontz or Clive Barker. Stephen King is unique.

He was born in Portland, Maine, in 1947, the second son of Donald and Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King. He graduated from the University of Maine in 1970, with a B.S. in English. In January of 1971 he married Tabitha Spruce, and in the Fall of 1971 he began teaching high school English in Hampden, Maine. He wrote in the evenings and on weekends, selling several stories to men's magazines.

In the spring of 1973, Doubleday accepted his novel *Carrie*, and later that year a fairly lucrative paperback sale enabled him to leave teaching and write full time.

Carrie was followed rapidly by *Salem's Lot*, *The Shining* (inspired by a brief stay in Colorado) and the body of work detailed for you in the bibliography on page 56. His most recent publications are *The Stand* (the uncut version, Doubleday 1990) and a long essay on Maine little league baseball (*The New Yorker*, April 16, 1990). Talk about different voices!

He stands 6'4" and weighs about 200 pounds. His middle name is Edwin. And I think that is all we need to tell you about America's best known and best selling author, except that he is a good friend of science fiction and of F&SF, and we are pleased to offer his two latest stories in our first special one-author issue since 1977. — *E. L. F.*

**Not so for certain horror short stories, many of which I've admired and published.*

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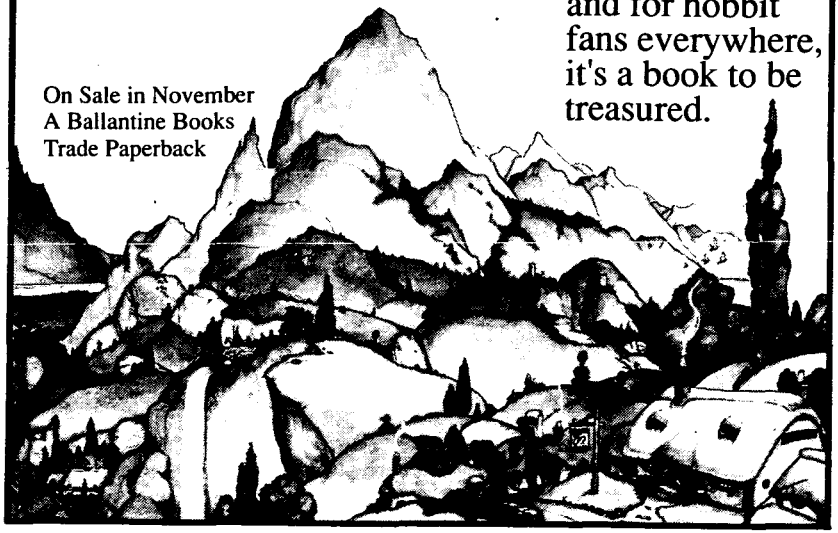

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Stephen King's short stories have appeared in a startling array of publications, beginning with "The Glass Floor" (Startling Mystery Stories, 1967). His F&SF appearances include "The Night of the Tiger" (1978), a series of Dark Tower stories, and "The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet" (1984). Here is his latest story, concerning the Final Jeopardy of Howard Mitla . . .

THE MOVING FINGER

By Stephen King

WHEN THE SCRATCHing started, Howard Mitla was sitting alone in the Queens apartment where he lived with his wife. Howard was one of New York's lesser-known certified public accountants. Violet Mitla, one of New York's lesser-known dental assistants, had waited until "Wheel of Fortune" was over before going down to the store on the corner to get a pint of ice cream. "Jeopardy" was on after "Wheel," and she didn't care for that one. She said it was because Alex Trebek looked like a crooked evangelist, but Howard knew the truth: "Jeopardy" made her feel dumb.

The scratching sound was coming from the bathroom just off the short squib of hall that led to the bedroom. Howard tightened up as soon as he heard it. It wasn't a junkie or a burglar in there, not with the heavy-gauge mesh he had put over all the windows two years ago at his own expense. It sounded more like a mouse in the basin or the tub.

Maybe even a rat.

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He waited through the first few questions, hoping the scratching sound would go away on its own, but it didn't. When the commercial came on, he got reluctantly up from his chair and walked to the bathroom door. It was standing ajar, and from here he could hear the scratching sound even better.

Almost certainly a mouse or a rat. Little paws clicking against the porcelain.

"Damn," Howard said, and went into the kitchen.

Standing in the little space between the gas stove and the refrigerator were a few cleaning implements — a mop, a bucket filled with old rags, a broom with a dustpan snugged down over the handle. Howard took the broom in one hand, holding it well down toward the bristles, and the dustpan in the other. Thus armed, he walked reluctantly back through the small living room to the bathroom door. He cocked his head forward. Listened.

Scratch, scratch, scritchy-scratch.

A very small sound. Probably not a rat. Yet that was what his mind insisted on conjuring up. Not just a rat, but a *New York* rat, a subway-bred super-rat. An ugly, bushy thing with tiny black eyes and long whiskers like wire and snaggleteeth protruding from below its V-shaped upper lip.

The sound was tiny, almost delicate, but nevertheless —

Behind him, Alex Trebek said, "This Russian madman was shot, stabbed, and strangled . . . all in the same night."

"Who was Lenin?" one of the contestants responded.

"Who was *Rasputin*, you dummy," Howard Mitla murmured. He transferred the dustpan to the hand holding the broom, then snaked his free hand into the bathroom and turned on the light. He stepped in and moved quickly to the tub crammed into the corner below the dirty, mesh-covered window. He hated rats and mice, hated all little furry things that squeaked and scuttered (and sometimes bit), but he had discovered as a boy growing up in Hell's Kitchen that if you had to dispatch one of them, it was best to do it quickly. It would do him no good to sit in his chair and ignore the sound; Vi had helped herself to a couple of beers during "Wheel of Fortune," and the bathroom would be her first stop when she returned from the market. If there was a mouse in the tub, she would raise the roof . . . and demand he do his manly duty and dispatch it anyway. Posthaste.

The tub was empty save for the hand-held shower attachment. Its

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hose lay on the enamel like a dead pink snake.

The scratching had stopped, either when Howard turned on the light or when he entered the room, but now it started again. Behind him. He turned and took three steps toward the bathroom basin, raising the broom handle as he moved.

The fist wrapped around the handle got to the level of his chin and then froze. He stopped moving. His jaw came unhinged. If he had looked at himself in the toothpaste-spotted mirror over the basin, he would have seen shiny strings of spittle, as gossamer as strands of spiderweb, gleaming between his tongue and the roof of his mouth.

A finger had poked its way out of the drain hole in the basin.

A human finger.

For a moment it froze, as if aware it had been discovered. Then it began to move again, feeling its wormlike way around the pink porcelain. It reached the white rubber plug, felt its way over it, then descended to the porcelain again. The scratching noise hadn't been made by the tiny claws of a mouse after all. It was the nail on the end of that finger, tapping the porcelain as it circled and circled.

Howard gave voice to a rusty, bewildered scream, dropped the broom, and ran for the bathroom door. He hit the tile wall with his shoulder instead, rebounded, and tried again. This time he got out, swept the door shut behind him, and only stood there with his back pressed against it, breathing hard. His heartbeat was hard, toneless Morse code high up in one side of his throat.

He couldn't have stood there for long — when he regained control of his thoughts, Alex Trebek was still guiding that evening's three contestants through Single Jeopardy — but while he stood there, Howard had no sense of time passing, where he was, or even who he was.

What brought him out of it was a clanging bell from the TV — one that signaled a Daily Double square.

"The category is Space and Aviation," Alex was saying. "You currently have seven hundred dollars, Mildred — how much do you wish to wager?"

Howard moved away from the door and back into the living room on legs that felt like pogo sticks. He still had the dustpan in one hand. He looked at it for a moment, and then let it fall to the carpet. It hit with a dusty little thump.

"I didn't see that," Howard said trembling, and collapsed into his chair.

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"All right, Mildred — for five hundred dollars: This Air Force test site was originally known as Miroc Proving Ground."

Howard peered at the TV. Mildred, a mousy little woman with a hearing aid as big as a clock radio screwed into one ear, was thinking deeply.

"I didn't *see* that," he said with a little more conviction.

"What is . . . Vandenberg Air Base?" Mildred asked.

"No, you dummy," Howard told her. "What is *Edwards* Air Base." And, as Alex Trebek confirmed what Howard Mitla already knew, he repeated: "I didn't see that *at all.*"

But Violet would be back soon, and he had left the broom in the bathroom.

Alex Trebek told the contestants — and the viewing audience — that it was still anybody's game, and they would be back to play Double Jeopardy, where the scores could *really* change, in two shakes of a lamb's tail. A politician came on and began explaining why he should be reelected. Howard got reluctantly to his feet. His legs felt a little more like legs and a little less like pogo sticks with metal fatigue now, but he still didn't want to go back into the bathroom.

Look, he told himself, *this is perfectly simple. Things like this always are. You had a momentary hallucination, the sort of thing that probably happens to people all the time. The only reason you don't hear about them more often is because people don't like to talk about them . . . having hallucinations is embarrassing. Talking about them makes people feel the way you're going to feel if that broom is still on the floor in there when Vi comes back and asks what you were up to.*

"Look," the politician on TV was saying in rich, confidential tones. "When you get right down to cases, it's perfectly simple: Do you want an honest, competent man running the Nassau County Bureau of Taxation, or do you want a hired gun from upstate, a man who's never even—"

"It was air in the pipes, I bet," Howard said, and although the sound that had taken him into the bathroom in the first place had not sounded the slightest bit like air in the pipes, just hearing his own voice — reasonable, under control again — got him moving with a little more authority.

And besides — Vi would be home soon. Any minute, really.

He stood outside the door, listening.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

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A fingernail tapping its way around the porcelain like a cane belonging to the world's smallest blind man.

"Air in the pipes!" he said, and boldly threw the bathroom door open. He bent low, grabbed the broom handle, and snatched it back out the door. He did not have to take more than two steps into the little room with its faded, lumpy linoleum and its dingy, mesh-crisscrossed view on the air shaft, and he most certainly did not look into the bathroom sink.

He stood outside, listening.

Scratch, scratch. Scritch-scratch.

He returned the broom and dustpan to the little nook in the kitchen between the stove and the refrigerator, and then returned to the living room. He stood there for a moment, looking at the bathroom door. It stood ajar, spilling a fan of yellow light into the little squib of hall.

You better go turn off the light. You know how Vi raises the roof about stuff like that. You don't even have to go in. Just reach through the door and flick it off.

But what if something touched his hand while he was reaching for the light switch?

What if another finger touched *his* finger?

How about *that,* fellows and girls?

He could still hear that sound. There was something terribly relentless about it. It was maddening.

Scratch. Scritch, Scratch.

On the TV, Alex Trebek was reading the Double Jeopardy categories. Howard went over and turned up the sound a little. Then he sat down in his chair again and told himself he didn't hear anything from the bathroom, not a single thing.

Except maybe a little air in the pipes.

VI MITLA was one of those large women who move with such dainty precision that they seem almost fragile . . . but Howard had been married to her for twenty-one years, and he knew that there was nothing fragile about her at all. She ate, drank, worked, danced, and made love in exactly the same way: con brio. She came into the apartment like a pocket hurricane. One large arm curled a brown paper sack against the ride side of her impressive bosom. She carried it through into the kitchen without pausing. Howard heard the bag crackle,

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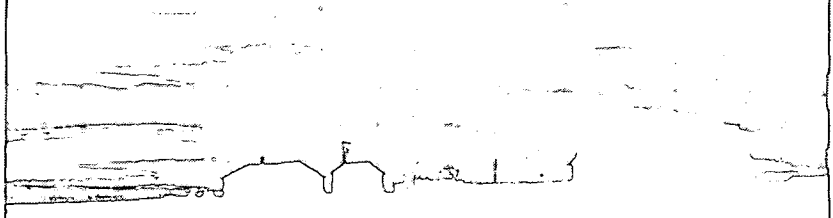

Jack Crow and his Team of vampire killers have it down to a science. First get the new living dead—then go after the Masters with anything it takes. Now, suddenly the game has changed and Crow and his Team have become the hunted. Somehow the Masters knew who they were. But Crow wasn't going to lie down and die. He and his Team planned to do some bloodletting of their own, even if it meant wading into the middle of a no-exit trap...

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heard the refrigerator door open and then close again. When she came back, she tossed Howard her coat. "Hang this up for me, will you?" she asked. "I've got to pee. Do I ever! Whew!"

"Whew!" was one of Vi's favorite exclamations. It rhymed with P.U., the child's exclamation for something smelly, when she said it.

"Sure, Vi," Howard said, and rose slowly to his feet with Vi's dark blue car coat in his arms. His eyes never left her as she went down the hall and through the bathroom door.

"Con Ed loves it when you leave the lights on, Howie," she called back.

"I did it on purpose," he said. "I knew that'd be your first stop."

She laughed. He heard the rustle of her clothes. "You know me too well — people will start saying we oughtta get married."

You ought to tell her — warn her, Howard thought, and knew he could do nothing of the kind. What was he supposed to say? Watch out, Vi, there's a finger coming out of the basin drain hole; don't let the guy it belonged to poke you in the eye if you bend over to get a glass of water?

Besides, it had just been a hallucination, one brought on by a little air in the pipes and his fear of rats and mice. Now that some minutes had gone by, this seemed more and more plausible to him.

All the same, he just stood there with Vi's coat in his arms. He stood there waiting to see if she would scream.

"My God, Howard!" Vi yelled, and Howard jumped, hugging the coat more tightly to his chest. His heart, which had begun to slow down, began to do its Morse code number again.

"What?"

"*Half the towels are on the floor!* What happened?"

"I don't know," he called back. His heart was thumping harder than ever. He supposed he must have knocked the towels off the shelf during his first attempt to exit the bathroom — the one when he had hit the wall.

"It must be spookies," she said. "And you forgot to put the ring down again."

"Sorry," he said.

"Yeah, that's what you always say," her voice floated back. "Sometimes I think you want me to fall in and drown. I really *do!*"

There was a clunk as she put it down herself. He waited, heart thumping away, her coat still hugged against his chest.

"The first man to set foot on the moon," Alex Trebek read.

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"Who was Neil Aldrin?" Mildred snapped right back.

"Neil *Armstrong*, you dummy," Howard said.

Pwooosh! There went the flush. And the moment he was waiting for (Howard had just realized this consciously) was now at hand. The pause seemed almost endless. Then he heard the squeak of the washer in the bathroom faucet marked H (he kept meaning to replace that washer and kept forgetting), followed by water flowing into the basin, followed by the sound of Vi briskly washing her hands.

No screams.

Of course not, because there was no *finger*.

"Air in the pipes," Howard said with more assurance, and went to hang up his wife's coat.

She came out, adjusting her skirt. "I got the ice cream," she said, "cherry-vanilla, just like you wanted, but before we try it, why don't you have a beer with me, Howie? It's this new stuff. American Grain, it's called. I never heard of it, but it was on sale, so I bought a six-pack. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, am I right?"

"O.K." Now that he was over his fright, a beer sounded like just the thing. But as Vi went out into the kitchen to get him a glass of her new find, he realized he wasn't over his fright at all. He supposed that having a hallucination was better than seeing — actually *seeing* — a finger poked out of the drain of the bathroom basin, a finger that was alive and moving around, but it wasn't exactly an evening-maker, either.

Howard sat down in his chair again. As Alex Trebek announced the Final Jeopardy category — it was The Sixties — he found himself thinking of various TV shows he'd seen where it turned out that a character who was having hallucinations either had (a) epilepsy or (b) a brain tumor. It seemed there were a lot of them.

"You know," Vi said, coming back into the room with two glasses of beer, "I don't like the Vietnamese people who run that market. I don't think I'll *ever* like them. I think they're sneaky."

"Have you ever caught them doing anything sneaky?" Howard asked. He himself thought the Lahs were exceptional people . . . but tonight he didn't care much one way or the other.

"No," Vi said, "not a thing. And that makes me all the more suspicious. Also, they *smile* all the time. My father used to say, 'Never trust a smiling

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man.' He also said . . . Howard, are you feeling all right?"

"He said *that?*" Howard asked, making a rather feeble attempt at levity.

"You look pale. Are you coming down with something?"

No, he thought of saying, *not sick — sick's too mild a word for it. I think I might have epilepsy, or maybe a brain tumor. You see, Vi, while you were at the store, I thought I saw a finger sticking out of the bathroom sink.*

"It's just work, I guess," he said. "I told you about the new tax account. St. Anne's Hospital."

"What about it?"

"It's a rat's nest," he said, and that immediately made him think of the bathroom again — the sink and the drain. "Nuns shouldn't be allowed to do bookkeeping. Someone ought to have put it in the Bible just to make sure."

"You let Mr. Lathrop push you around too much," Vi told him firmly. "It's going to go on and on unless you stand up for yourself. Do you want a heart attack?"

"No." *And I don't want epilepsy or a brain tumor, either. Please, God, make it a one-time thing. O.K.? Just some weird mental burp that happens once and never again. O.K.? Please? Pretty please? With some sugar on it?*

"You bet you don't," she said grimly. "Arlene Katz was saying to me just the other day that when men under fifty have heart attacks, they never come out of the hospital again. And you're only forty-one. You have to stand up for yourself, Howard. Stop being such a pushover."

"I guess so," he said glumly.

Alex Trebek came back on and gave the Final Jeopardy answer: "This group of hippies crossed the United States in a bus with writer Ken Kesey." The Final Jeopardy music began to play. The two men contestants were writing busily. Mildred, the woman with the microwave oven in her ear, looked lost. At last she began to scratch something. She did it with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

Vi took a deep swallow from her glass. "Hey!" she said. "Not bad! And only $1.67 a six-pack!"

Howard drank some himself. It was nothing special, but it was wet . . . and his throat felt very dry.

Neither of the male contestants was even close. Mildred was also wrong, but she, at least, was in the ballpark. "Who were the Merry Men?" she had written.

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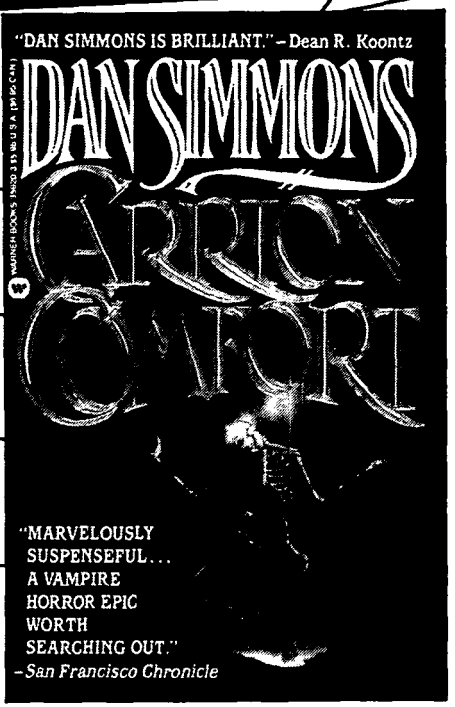
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"Merry *Pranksters*, you dummy," Howard said.

Vi looked at him admiringly. "You know all the answers, Howard, don't you?"

He sighed. "I only wish I did," he said.

Howard didn't care much for beer, but that night he drank three cans of American Grain. Vi commented on it, said that if she had known he was going to like it that much, she would have stopped by the drugstore and gotten him an I.V. hookup. An old joke. Howard forced a smile. He was actually hoping the beer would send him off to sleep quickly. He was afraid that, without a little help, he might be awake for quite a while, thinking about what he had imagined he'd seen in the bathroom sink.

But beer was also full of vitamin pee, and around 8:30, after Vi had retired to the bedroom to put on her nightgown, he went into the bathroom to relieve himself.

First he walked over to the bathroom sink and forced himself to look in.

Nothing.

This was a relief (in the end, a hallucination was still better than an actual finger, he had discovered, despite the possibility of a brain tumor), but he still didn't like looking down into the drain. The brass crosshatch inside that was supposed to catch things like clots of hair or dropped bobby pins had disappeared years ago, and so there was only a dark hole rimmed by a circle of tarnished steel. It looked like a staring eye socket.

Howard took the rubber plug and stuck it into the drain.

That was better.

He stepped away from the sink, put up the toilet ring (Vi complained bitterly if he forgot to put it down he was through, but never seemed to feel any pressing need to put it back up when *she* was), and addressed the john. He was one of those men who began to urinate immediately only when the need was extreme (and who could not urinate at all in crowded public lavatories — the thought of all those men standing in line behind him just shut down his circuits), and he did now what he almost always did in the few seconds between the aiming of the instrument and the commencement of target practice: he recited prime numbers in his mind.

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He had reached thirteen and was on the verge of flowing, when there was a sudden sharp sound from behind him: *pwuck!* His bladder, recognizing the sound of the rubber plug being forced sharply out of the drain even before his brain did, clamped shut immediately, and rather painfully.

A moment later that sound — the sound of the nail clipping lightly against the porcelain as the questing finger twisted and turned — began again. Howard's skin went cold and seemed to shrink until it was too small to cover the flesh beneath. A single drop of urine spilled from him and plinked in the bowl before his penis actually seemed to shrink in his hand, retreating like a turtle seeking the safety of its shell.

Howard walked slowly and not quite steadily over to the washbasin. He looked in.

The finger was back. It was a very long finger, but seemed otherwise normal. Howard could see the nail, which was neither bitten nor abnormally long, and the first two knuckles. As he watched, it went tapping and feeling around the porcelain.

He bent abruptly and looked beneath the sink. The pipe that came out of the floor was no more than three inches in diameter. It was not big enough for an arm. Besides, it made a severe bend at the place where the sink trap was. So just what was that finger attached to? What *could* it be attached to?

Howard straightened up again, and for one alarming moment, he felt that his head might simply detach itself from his neck and float away. Small black specks flocked across his field of vision.

I'm going to faint! he thought. He grabbed his right earlobe and yanked it once, hard, the way a frightened passenger who has seen trouble up the line might yank the Emergency Stop cord of a railroad car. The dizziness passed . . . but the finger was still there.

It was *not* a hallucination. How could it be? He could see a tiny bead of water on the nail, and a tiny thread of whiteness beneath it — soap, almost surely soap. Vi had washed her hands after using the john.

It could be, though. Just because you see water and soap on it, does that mean you can't be imagining it? If you're not imagining it, what's it doing *in there? How did it get there in the first place? And how come Vi didn't see it?*

Call her, then — call her in! his mind instructed, and in the next microsecond countermanded its own order. *No! Don't do that! Because*

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if you go on seeing it, and she doesn't—

Howard shut his eyes tight, and for a moment lived in a world where there were only red flashes of light and his own crazy heartbeat.

When he opened them again, the finger was still there.

"What are you?" he whispered through tightly stretched lips. "What *are* you, and what are you doing here?"

The finger stopped its blind exploration at once. It swiveled — and then pointed directly at Howard. Howard blundered a step backward, his hands rising to his mouth to stifle a scream. He wanted to tear his eyes away from the wretched, awful thing, wanted to flee the bathroom in a rush (and never mind what Vi might think or say or see) . . . but for the moment he was paralyzed and unable to tear his grip away from that pink-white digit, which now resembled nothing so much as an organic periscope.

Then it curled at the second knuckle. The end of the finger dipped, touched the porcelain, and resumed its tapping circular explorations once more.

"Howie?" Vi called. "Coming to bed, or are you staying up for a while?"

He opened his mouth to speak. No sound came. He forced himself to swallow and tried again. "Right out!"

He flushed away the single drop of pee that had fallen into the toilet, then moved toward the door, giving the sink a wide berth. He *did* catch sight of himself in the bathroom mirror, however; his eyes were huge, his skin wretchedly pale. He gave each of his cheeks a brisk pinch before leaving the bathroom that had become, in the space of one short hour, the most horrible and inexplicable place he had ever visited in his life.

WHEN VI came out into the kitchen to see what was taking him so long, she found Howard looking into the refrigerator.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"A Pepsi. I think I'll go down to Lah's and get one."

"On top of three beers and a bowl of cherry-vanilla ice cream? You'll bust, Howard."

"No, I won't," he said. But if he wasn't able to off-load what his kidneys were holding, he might.

"Are you *sure* you feel all right?" Vi was looking at him critically, but her tone was gentler now — tinged with real concern. "Because you look terrible, Really."

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"Well," he said reluctantly, "there's been some flu going around the office. I suppose—"

"*I'll* go get you the damned soda, if you really need it," she said.

"No, you won't," Howard interposed hastily. "You're in your nightgown. Look — I'll put on my overcoat."

"When was the last time you had a physical, Howard? It's been so long I've forgotten."

"I'll check," he said vaguely, going through into the hallway where the coats were hung.

"You better! And if you insist on being crazy and going out, wear my scarf!"

"O.K. Good idea." He pulled on his topcoat and buttoned it facing away from her, so she wouldn't see how his hands were shaking. When he turned around, Vi was just disappearing into the bathroom. He stood there in fascinated silence for several moments, waiting to hear if she would scream *this* time, and then the water began to run in the basin. This was followed by the sound of Vi brushing her teeth in her usual manner: con brio.

He stood there a moment longer, and his mind suddenly offered its verdict in four flat, no-nonsense words: *I'm losing my marbles.*

It might be . . . but that didn't change the fact that if he didn't take a whiz very soon, he was going to flood the Levi's he was wearing. That, at least, was a problem he could solve, and Howard took a certain comfort in the fact. He opened the door, began to step out, then paused to pull Vi's scarf off the hook.

When are you going to tell her about this latest fascinating development in the life of Howard Mitla? his mind inquired suddenly.

Howard shut the thought out and concentrated on tucking the ends of the scarf into his overcoat.

The Mitla apartment was on the fourth floor of a nine-story building on Hawking Street. To the right and half a block down, on the corner of Hawking and Queens Boulevard, was Lah's Twenty-Four-Hour Delicatessen and Convenience Market. Howard turned left and walked to the end of the building. Here was a narrow alleyway that gave on the air shaft at the rear of the building. Trash bins lined both sides of the alley. Between them were littery spaces where homeless people — some but by no means

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all of them winos — often spent their nights. No one seemed to have taken up residence in the alley this evening, for which Howard was profoundly grateful.

He stepped between the first and second bins, unzipped, and urinated copiously. At first the relief was so great that he felt almost blessed in spite of the evening's trials, but as the flow began to slacken, he watched the steam rise off the concrete wall in lazy tendrils, and began to consider his position again.

It was, in a word, untenable.

Here he was, pissing against the wall of the building in which he had a warm, safe apartment, looking over his shoulder all the while to see if he was being observed. The arrival of a junkie or a mugger while he was in such a defenseless position would be bad, but he wasn't sure that the arrival of someone he knew — the Fensters from 2-C, for instance, or the Dettlebaums from 3-F — wouldn't be even worse. What could he say? And what might that motormouth Alicia Fenster say to Vi?

He finished, zipped his pants, and walked back to the mouth of the alley. After a prudent look in both directions, he proceeded down to Lah's and bought a can of Pepsi-Cola from the smiling, olive-skinned Mrs. Lah.

"You look pale tonight, Mr. Mit-ra," she said through her constant smile. "Feering all right?"

Oh yes, he thought. *I'm fearing just fine, thank you, Mrs. Pang. Never better on* that *particular score.*

"I think I might have caught a little bug at the sink," he told her. She began to frown through her smile, and he realized what he had said. "At the office, I mean."

"Better bundle up," she said. The frown line had smoothed out of her almost ethereal forehead. "Radio says cold weather is coming."

"Thank you," he said, and left. On his way back to the apartment, he opened the Pepsi and poured it out on the sidewalk. Considering the fact that his bathroom had apparently become hostile territory, the last thing he needed tonight was any more to drink.

When he let himself in again, he could hear Vi snoring softly in the bedroom. The three beers had sent her off to the land of Nod quickly and efficiently. He put the empty soda can on the counter in the kitchen, then paused outside the bathroom door.

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Scratch-scratch. Scritch-scritch-scratch.

"Dirty son of a bitch," he whispered.

He went to bed without brushing his teeth for the first time since his two-week stint at Camp High Pines, when he had been twelve and his mother had forgotten to pack his toothbrush.

And lay in bed beside Vi, wakeful.

He could hear the sound of the finger making its ceaseless exploratory rounds in the bathroom sink, the nail clicking and tap-dancing. He couldn't *really* hear it, not with both doors closed, and he knew this, but he *imagined* he heard it, and that was just as bad.

No, it isn't, he told himself. *At least you know you're imagining it. With the finger itself, you're not sure.*

This was but little comfort. He still wasn't able to get to sleep, and he was no closer to solving his problem. He *did* know he couldn't spend the rest of his life making excuses to go outside and urinate in the alleyway next to the building. He doubted if he could manage that for even forty-eight hours. And what was going to happen when he had to unload his bowels? Was he going to do *that* in the alleyway?

Howard, who had always had a deep reserve about his eliminatory functions, shuddered.

Maybe, the voice in his head suggested cautiously, *you'll get used to it.*

No. The idea was insane. He had been married to Vi for twenty-one years, and he still found it impossible to go to the bathroom when she was in there with him. Those circuits just overloaded and shut down. She could sit there cheerily on the john, peeing and talking to him about her day at Dr. Stone's while he shaved, but he could not do the same. He just wasn't built that way.

If that finger doesn't go away on its own, you better be prepared to apply for a building code permit, then, the voice told him, *because I think you're going to have to make some modifications in the basic structure.*

He turned his head and glanced at the clock on the bed table. It was quarter to two in the morning . . . and, he realized dolefully, he had to pee again.

He got up carefully, stole from the bedroom, passed the closed bathroom door with the ceaseless scratching, tapping sounds still coming from behind it, and went into the kitchen. He moved the step stool in front

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of the kitchen sink, mounted it, and aimed carefully into the drain, ears cocked all the while for the sound of Vi getting out of bed.

He finally managed . . . but not until he had reached 347 in his catalog of prime numbers. It was an all-time record. He replaced the step stool and shuffled back to bed, thinking: *I can't go on like this. Not for long. I just can't.*

He bared his teeth at the bathroom door as he passed it.

When the alarm went off at 6:30 the next morning, he stumbled out of bed, shuffled down to the bathroom, and went inside.

The drain was empty.

"Thank God," he said in a low, trembling voice. A sublime gust of relief — relief so great it felt like some sort of sacred revelation — blew through him. "Oh thank G—"

The finger popped up like a jack popping out of a jack-in-the-box, as if the sound of his voice had called it. It spun around three times, fast, and then bent as stiffly as an Irish setter on point. And it was pointing straight at him.

Howard retreated, his upper lip rising and falling rapidly in an unconscious snarl.

Now the tip of the finger curled up and down, up and down . . . as if it were waving at him. Good morning, Howard, so nice to be here.

"Fuck you," he muttered. He turned and faced the toilet. He tried resolutely to pass water . . . and nothing. He felt a sudden lurid rush of rage — an urge to simply whirl and pounce on the nasty intruder in the sink, to rip it out of its cave, throw it on the floor, and stamp on it with his bare feet.

"Howard?" Vi asked blearily. She knocked on the door. "Almost done?"

"Yes," he said, trying his best to make his voice normal. He flushed the toilet.

It was clear that Vi would not have known or much cared if he sounded normal or not, and she took very little interest in how he looked. She was suffering from an unplanned hangover.

"Not the worst one I ever had, but never again," she mumbled as she burst past him, hiked her nightdress, and plopped onto the jakes. She propped her forehead in one hand. "Not on *that* stuff, at least. American Grain, my rosy red ass. Someone should have told those babies you put the fertilizer on the hops *before* you grow 'em, not after. A headache on

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three lousy beers! Gosh! Well — you buy cheap, you get cheap. Especially when it's those Vietnamese doing the selling. Be a dollface and get me some aspirin, will you, Howie?"

"Sure," he said, and approached the sink carefully. The finger was gone again. Vi, it seemed, had once more frightened it off. He got the aspirin out of the medicine cabinet and removed two. When he reached to put the bottle back, he saw the tip of the finger protrude momentarily from the drain. It came out no more than a quarter of an inch. Again it seemed to execute that miniature wave before diving back out of sight.

I'm going to get rid of you, my friend, he thought suddenly. The feeling that accompanied the thought was anger — pure, simple anger — and it delighted him. The emotion cruised into his battered, bewildered mind like one of those huge Soviet icebreakers that crush and slice their way through masses of pack ice with almost casual ease. *I am going to get you. I don't know how yet, but I will.*

He handed Vi the aspirin and said, "Just a minute — I'll get you a glass of water."

"Don't bother," Vi said drearily, and crunched both tablets between her teeth. "Works faster this way."

"I'll bet it plays hell on your insides, though," Howard said. He found he didn't mind being in the bathroom very much at all, as long as Vi was in here with him.

"Don't care," she said, more drearily still. She flushed the toilet. "How are you this morning?"

"Not great," he said truthfully.

"You got one, too?"

"A hangover? No. It's the flu from the office, I guess. My throat's sore, and I think I'm running a finger."

"What?"

"*Fever,*" he said. "Fever's what I meant to say."

"Well, you better stay home." She went to the sink, selected her toothbrush from the holder, and began to brush vigorously.

"Maybe you better, too," he said. He did not want Vi to stay home; he wanted her standing safely at Dr. Stone's right side while he filled cavities and did root canals. But he felt it would have been unfeeling not to have said *something.*

She glanced up at him in the mirror. Already a little color was returning

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to her cheeks, a little sparkle to her eye. Vi also recovered con brio. "The day I call in sick at work because I've got a hangover will be the day I quit drinking altogether," she said. "Besides, the doc's gonna need me. We're pulling a complete set of uppers. Dirty job, but somebody's gotta do it."

She spat directly into the drain, and Howard thought, fascinated: *The next time it pops up, it'll have toothpaste on it. Jesus!*

"You stay home and keep warm and drink plenty of fluids," Vi said. She had adopted her Head Nurse tone now, the tone that said, *If you're not taking all this down, be it on your own head.* "Catch up on your reading. And by the by, show that Mr. Big Turd Lathrop what he's missing when you don't come in. Make him think twice."

"That's not a bad idea at all," Howard said.

She kissed him on the way by and dropped him a wink. "Your Shrinking Violet knows a few of the answers, too," she said. By the time she left to catch her bus half an hour later, she was singing lustily, her hangover forgotten.

The first thing Howard did following Vi's departure was to haul the step stool over to the kitchen sink and whiz into the drain again. It was easier with Vi out of the house; he had barely reached twenty-three, the ninth prime number, before getting down to business.

With *that* problem squared away — at least for the next few hours —he walked back into the hall and poked his head through the bathroom door. He saw the finger at once, and that was wrong. It was wrong because he was way over here, and the basin should have cut off his view. But it didn't, and that meant —

"What are you doing, you bastard?" Howard croaked, and the finger, which had been twisting back and forth as if to test the wind, turned toward him. There was toothpaste on it, just as he had suspected there would be. It bent in his direction . . . only, now it bent in *three places,* and that was impossible, quite impossible, because when you got to the third knuckle of any given finger, you were up to the back of the hand.

It's getting longer, his mind gibbered. *I don't know how that can happen, but it is — if I can see it over the top of the basin from here, it must be at least three inches long . . . maybe more!*

He closed the bathroom door gently and staggered back into the living room. His legs had once again turned into malfunctioning pogo sticks.

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His mental icebreaker was gone, crushed under a great white weight of panic and bewilderment. No iceberg this; this was a whole glacier.

Howard Mitla sat down in his chair and closed his eyes. He had never felt more alone, more disoriented, or more utterly powerless in his entire life. He sat that way for quite some time, and at last his fingers began to relax on the arms of his chair. He had spent most of the previous night wide-awake. Now he simply drifted off to sleep while the lengthening finger in his bathroom drain tapped and circled, circled and tapped.

He dreamed he was a contestant on "Jeopardy" — not the new, big-money version, but the original daytime show. Instead of computer screens, someone behind the game board simply pulled up a card when a contestant called for a particular answer. Alex Trebek had been replaced by Art Fleming, with his slicked-back hair and somehow prissy, poor-boy-at-the-party smile. The woman in the middle was still Mildred, and she still had a microwave relay station in her ear, but her hair was teased up into a Jacqueline Kennedy bouffant, and her wire-rimmed glasses had been replaced by a pair of cat's-eye frames.

And everyone was in black and white, him included.

"O.K., Howard," Art said, and pointed at him. His index finger was a grotesque thing, easily a foot long; it stuck out of his loosely curled fist like a pedagogue's pointer. There was dried toothpaste on the nail. "It's your turn to select."

Howard looked at the board and said, "I'd like Pests and Vipers for one hundred, Art."

The square with $100 on it was removed, revealing an answer that Art now read: "The best way to get rid of those troublesome fingers in your bathroom drain."

"What is . . . ," Howard said, and then came up blank. A black-and-white studio audience stared silently at him. A black-and-white cameraman dollied in for a close-up of his sweat-streaked black-and-white face. "What is. . . ."

"Hurry up, Howard, you're almost out of time," Art Fleming cajoled, waving his grotesquely elongated finger at Howard, but Howard was a total blank. He was going to miss the question; the hundred bucks would be deducted from his score; he was going to go into the minus column; he was going to be a complete loser; they probably wouldn't even

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give him the lousy set of Grolier Encyclopedia. . . .

A delivery truck on the street below backfired loudly. Howard sat up with a jerk that almost pitched him out of his chair.

"*What is liquid drain cleaner?*" he screamed. "*What is liquid drain cleaner?*"

It was, of course, the answer. The *correct* answer.

He began to laugh. He was still laughing five minutes later, as he shrugged into his topcoat and stepped out the door.

Howard picked up the plastic bottle the toothpick-chewing clerk in the Queen's Boulevard Happy Handyman Hardware Store had just set down on the counter. There was a cartoon woman in an apron on the front. She stood with one hand on her hip while she used the other hand to pour a gush of drain cleaner into something that was either an industrial sink or Orson Welles's bidet. DRAIN-EZE, the label proclaimed. *TWICE the strength of most leading brands! Opens bathroom sinks, showers, and drains IN MINUTES! Dissolves hair and organic matter!*

"Organic matter," Howard said. "Just what does that mean?"

The clerk, a bald man with a lot of warts on his forehead, shrugged. The toothpick poking out between his lips rolled from one side of his mouth to the other. "Food, I guess. But I wouldn't stand the bottle next to the liquid soap, if you know what I mean."

"Would it eat holes in your *hands*?" Howard asked, hoping he sounded properly horrified.

The clerk shrugged again. "I guess it ain't as powerful as the stuff we used to sell — the stuff with lye in it — but that stuff ain't legal anymore. At least, I don't *think* it is. But you see that, don'tcha?" He tapped the skull-and-crossbones POISON logo with one short, stubby finger. Howard got a good look at that finger. He had found himself noticing a lot of fingers on his walk down to the Happy Handyman.

"Yes," Howard said. "I see it."

"Well, they don't put that on just because it looks, you know, sporty. If you got kids, keep it out of their reach. And don't gargle with it." He burst out laughing, the toothpick riding up and down on his lower lip.

"I won't," Howard said. He turned the bottle and read the fine print. *Contains sodium hydroxide and potassium hydroxide. Causes severe burns*

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The clerk later told police he didn't like that smile. Not one little bit.

on contact. Well, that was pretty good. He didn't know if it was good enough, but there was a way to find out, wasn't there?

The voice in his head spoke up dubiously. *What if you only make it mad, Howard? What then?*

Well . . . so what? It was in the drain, wasn't it?

Yes . . . but it appears to be growing.

Still — what choice did he have? On this subject the little voice was silent.

"I hate to hurry you over such an important purchase," the clerk said, "but I'm by myself this morning, and I have some invoices to go over, so —"

"I'll take it," Howard said, reaching for his wallet. As he did, his eye caught something else — a display below a sign that read FALL CLEARANCE SALE. "What are those?" he asked. "Over there?"

"Those?" the clerk asked. "Electric hedge clippers. We got two dozen of 'em last June, but they didn't move worth a damn."

"I'll take a pair," said Howard Mitla. He began to smile, and the clerk later told police he didn't like that smile. Not one little bit.

Howard put his new purchases on the kitchen counter when he got home, pushing the box containing the electric hedge clippers over to one side, hoping it would not come to *those.* Surely not. Then he carefully read the instructions on the bottle of Drain-Eze.

Slowly pour 1/4 bottle into drain . . . let stand fifteen minutes. Repeat application if necessary.

But surely it wouldn't come to *that,* either . . . would it?

To make sure it wouldn't, Howard decided he would pour *half* the bottle into the drain. Maybe a little bit more.

He struggled with the safety cap and finally managed to get it off. He then walked through the living room and into the hall with the white plastic bottle held out in front of him, and a grim expression — the expression of a soldier who knows he will be ordered over the side of the trench at any moment — on his usually mild face.

Wait a minute! the voice in his head cried out as he reached for the

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doorknob, and his hand faltered. *This is crazy! You KNOW it's crazy! You don't need drain cleaner; you need a psychiatrist! You need to lie down on a couch somewhere and tell someone you imagine — that's right, that's the word, IMAGINE — there's a finger stuck in the bathroom sink, a finger that's growing!*

"Oh no," Howard said, shaking his head firmly back and forth. "No way."

He could not — absolutely could not — visualize himself telling this story to a psychiatrist . . . to *anyone*, in fact. Suppose Mr. Lathrop got wind of it? He might, too. Through Vi's father, who had been a CPA in the firm of Dean, Green, and Lathrop. He had gotten Howard the interview, had written him a glowing recommendation . . . had, in fact, done everything but given him the job himself. Mr. DeHorne was retired now, but he and John Lathrop still saw a lot of each other. If Vi found out her Howie was going to see a shrink (and how could he keep it from her, a thing like that?), she would tell her mother — Vi told her mother *everything.* Mrs. DeHorne would tell her husband, of course. And Mr. DeHorne —

Howard found himself imagining the two men, his father-in-law and his boss, sitting in leather wing-backed chairs in some mythic club or other, the kind of wing-backed chairs that were studded with little gold nailheads. He saw them sipping sherry in this vision; the cut-glass decanter stood on the little table by Mr. Lathrop's right hand. (Howard had never seen either man actually drink sherry, but this morbid fantasy seemed to demand it.) He saw Mr. DeHorne — who was now doddering into his late seventies and had all the discretion of a housefly — lean confidentially forward and say, *You'll never believe what my son-in-law Howard's up to, John. He's going to see a psychiatrist! He thinks there's a finger in his bathroom sink, you see. Young people get funny ideas, don't they?*

And maybe he didn't really think all that would happen. He thought there was a possibility it might — if not in just that way, then in some other — but suppose it didn't? He *still* couldn't see himself going to a psychiatrist. Something in him — a close neighbor of that something that would not allow him to urinate in a public bathroom if there was a line of men behind him, no doubt — simply refused the idea. He would not get on one of those couches and supply the answer — *There's a finger sticking out of the bathroom sink* — so that some goatee-wearing head-

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shrinker could pelt him with questions. It would be like "Jeopardy" in Hell.

He reached for the knob again.

Call a plumber, then! the voice yelled desperately. *At least do that much! You don't have to tell him what you see! Just tell him the pipe's clogged! Or tell him your wife lost her wedding ring down the drain! Tell him ANYTHING!*

But that idea was, in a way, even more useless than the idea of calling a shrink. This was New York, not Des Moines. You could lose the Hope Diamond down your bathroom sink and still wait a week for a plumber to make a house call. He didn't *have* a week. He did not intend to spend the next seven days slinking around Queens, looking for gas stations where an attendant would accept five dollars for the privilege of allowing Howard Mitla to take a dump in a dirty, foul-smelling bathroom.

Then do it fast, the voice said, giving up. *At least do it fast.*

On this, Howard's two minds were united. He was, in truth, afraid that if he didn't act fast — and keep on acting — he would not act at all.

And surprise it, if you can. Take off your shoes.

Howard thought this was an extremely useful idea. He acted upon it at once, easing off first one loafer and then the other. He found himself wishing he had thought to put on rubber gloves — there might be some spattering — and he wondered if Vi still kept a pair under the kitchen sink. Never mind, though. He was screwed up to the sticking point. It was too late to go back.

He eased open the bathroom door and slipped inside.

The Mitla bathroom was never a very cheery place, but at this time of day, almost noon, it was at least fairly bright. Visibility wouldn't be a problem . . . and there was no sign of the finger. At least, not yet. Howard tiptoed across the room with the bottle of drain cleaner clutched tightly in his right hand. He bent over the sink and looked into the round black hole in the center of the faded pink porcelain.

Except, it *wasn't* dark. Something was rushing up through that blackness, hurrying up that small-bore, oozy pipe to greet him, to greet its good friend Howard Mitla.

"Take this!" Howard screamed, and tilted the bottle of Drain-Eze over the sink. Greenish blue fluid spilled out, a fluid almost thick enough to be called sludge. It struck the drain just as the finger emerged.

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The result was immediate and terrifying. The glop coated the nail and the tip of the finger. The finger went into a frenzy, whirling like a dervish around and around the limited circumference of the drain, spraying off small blue-green fans of Drain-Eze. Several droplets struck the light blue cotton shirt Howard was wearing and immediately ate holes in it. These holes fizzed brown lace at the edges, but the shirt was rather too large for him, and none of the stuff got through to his belly. Other drops stippled the skin of his right wrist and palm, but he did not feel these until later. His adrenaline was not just flowing; it was at flood tide.

The finger blurted up from the drain — joint after impossible joint of it. It was now smoking, and it smelled like a rubber boot sizzling on a hot barbecue grill.

"*Take this! Lunch is served, you bastard!*" Howard screamed, continuing to pour as the finger rose to a height of just over a foot, rising out of the drain like a cobra from a snake charmer's basket. It had almost reached the mouth of the plastic bottle, when it wavered, seemed to shudder, and suddenly reversed, zipping back down into the drain. Howard leaned farther over the basin to watch it go, and saw just a retreating flash of white far down in the drain. Lazy tendrils of smoke drifted up.

He drew a deep breath, and this was a mistake. He inhaled a great double lungful of Drain-Eze fumes. He was suddenly, violently sick. He vomited forcefully into the basin, and then staggered away, still gagging and trying to retch.

"*I did it!*" he shouted deliriously. His head swam with the combined stench of corrosive chemicals and burned flesh. Still, he felt almost exalted. He had met the enemy, and the enemy, by God and all the saints, was his. *His!*

"*Hidey-ho! Hidey-fucking-ho! I did it! I —*"

His gorge rose again. He half-knelt, half-swooned in front of the toilet, the bottle of Drain-Eze still held stiffly out in his right hand, and realized too late that Vi had put both the ring *and* the lid down this morning when she vacated the throne. He vomited all over the fuzzy pink toilet-seat cover, and then fell forward into his own gloop in a dead faint.

He could not have been unconscious for long, because the bathroom enjoyed full daylight for less than half an hour even in the middle of

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summer — then the other buildings cut off the direct sunlight and plunged the room into gloom again.

Howard raised his head slowly, aware he was coated from hairline to chin line with sticky, foul-smelling stuff. He was even more aware of something else. A clittering sound. It was coming from behind him, and it was getting closer.

He turned his head, which felt like an overfilled sandbag, slowly to his left. His eyes slowly widened. He hitched in a breath and tried to scream, but his throat locked.

The finger was coming for him.

It was easily seven feet long now, and getting longer all the time. It curved out of the sink in a stiff arc made by perhaps a dozen knuckles, descended to the floor, then curved again (*Double-jointed!* some distant commentator in his disintegrating mind reported with interest). Now it was tapping and feeling its way across the tile floor toward him. The last nine or ten inches were discolored and smoking. The nail had turned a strange greenish black color. Howard thought he could see the white shine of bone just below the first of its knuckles. It was quite badly burned, but it was not by any stretch of the imagination dissolved.

"Get away," Howard whispered, and for a moment the entire grotesque, jointed contraption came to a halt. It looked like a New Year's Eve party favor from Hell. Then it slithered straight toward him. The last half a dozen knuckles flexed, and the tip of the finger wrapped itself around Howard Mitla's ankle.

"*No!*" he screamed as the smoking Hydroxide Twins — Sodium and Potassium — ate through his nylon sock and sizzled his skin. He gave his foot a tremendous yank. For a moment the finger held — it was strong, very strong — and then Howard pulled free. He crawled toward the door with a huge clump of vomit-loaded hair hanging in his eyes. As he crawled, he tried to look back over his shoulder, but he could see nothing through his coagulated hair. Now his chest had unlocked, and he gave voice to a series of barking, frightful screams.

He could not *see* the finger, at least temporarily, but he could *hear* the finger, and now it was coming *fast, tictictictictic,* right behind him. Still trying to look back over his shoulder, he ran into the wall to the left of the bathroom door with his shoulder. The towels fell off the shelf again. He went sprawling, and at once the finger was around his *other*

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ankle, flexing tight with its charred and burning tip.

It began to pull him back toward the sink. It actually began to *pull him back.*

Howard uttered a deep and primitive howl — a sound such as had never before escaped his polite set of CPA vocal cords — and flailed at the edge of the door. He caught it with his right hand and gave a huge, panicky yank. His shirttail pulled free all the way around, and the seam under his right arm tore loose with a low purring sound, but he managed to pull free, losing only the ragged lower half of one sock.

He stumbled to his feet, turned, and saw the finger feeling its way toward him again. The nail at the end was now deeply slit and bleeding.

Needs a manicure, Howard thought, and uttered an anguished laugh. Then he ran for the kitchen.

SOMEONE WAS pounding on the door. Hard.

"Mitla! Hey, Mitla! What's going on in there?"

Feeny, from down the hall. A big, loud Irish drunk. Correction: a big, loud, *nosy* Irish drunk.

"Nothing I can't handle, my bog-trotting friend!" Howard shouted as he went into the kitchen. He laughed again and tossed his hair off his forehead. It went, but fell back in exactly the same jellied clump a second later. "Nothing I can't handle, oh, you better believe that! You can take that right to the bank and put it in your NOW account!"

"Hey! What did you call me?" Feeny responded. His voice, which had been truculent, now became ominous as well.

"Shut up!" Howard yelled. "I'm busy!"

"I want the yelling to stop, or I'm calling the cops!"

"*Fuck off!*" Howard screamed at him. Another first. He tossed his hair off his forehead . . . and *clump.* Back down it fell.

"I don't have to listen to your shit, you little four-eyed creep!"

Howard raked his hands through his vomit-loaded hair, and then flung them out in front of him in a curiously Gallic gesture — *et voilà!* it seemed to say. Warm juice and shapeless gobbets splattered across Vi's white kitchen cabinets. Howard didn't even notice. The hideous finger had seized each of his ankles once, and they burned as if they were wearing circlets of fire. Howard didn't care about that, either. He seized the box containing the electric hedge clippers. On the front a smiling dad with a

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pipe parked in his gob was trimming the hedge in front of an estate-sized home.

"You having a little drug party in there?" Feeny inquired from the hall.

"You better get out of here, you potato-eating cocksucker, or I'll introduce you to a friend of mine!" Howard yelled back. This struck him as incredibly funny. He threw his head back and yodeled at the kitchen ceiling, his hair standing up in strange jags and quills and glistening with stomach juices. He looked like a man who has embarked upon a violent love affair with a tube of Brylcreem.

"O.K., that's it," Feeny said. "That's *it*. I'm callin' the cops."

Howard barely heard him. Dennis Feeny would have to wait; he had bigger fish to fry. He had ripped the electric hedge clippers from the box, examined them feverishly, saw the battery compartment, and pried it open.

"'C' cells,' he muttered, laughing. "Good! That's good! No problem there!"

He yanked open one of the drawers to the left of the sink, pulling with such force that the stop broke off and the drawer flew all the way across the kitchen striking the stove and landing upside down on the linoleum floor with a bang and a clatter. Amid the general clutter — tongs, peelers, graters, paring knives, and garbage-bag ties — was a small treasure trove of batteries, mostly "C" cells and square nine-volts. Still laughing — it seemed he could no longer *stop* laughing — Howard fell on his knees and grubbed through the litter. He succeeded in cutting the pad of his right palm quite badly on the blade of a paring knife before seizing two of the "C" cells, but he felt this no more than he felt the burns he had sustained when he had been backsplashed. Now that Feeny had at last shut his braying Irish donkey's mouth, he could hear the tapping again. Not coming from the sink now, though — huh-uh, no way. The ragged nail was tapping on the bathroom door . . . or maybe the hall floor. He had neglected to close the door, he now remembered.

"Who gives a fuck?" Howard asked, and then he screamed: *"WHO GIVES A FUCK! I'M READY FOR YOU, MY FRIEND! I'M COMING TO KICK ASS AND CHEW BUBBLE GUM, AND I'M ALL OUT OF BUBBLE GUM! YOU'LL WISH YOU'D STAYED DOWN THE DRAIN!"*

He slammed the batteries into the compartment set into the handle of the hedge clipers and tried the power switch. Nothing.

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"Bite my crank!" Howard muttered. He pulled one of the batteries out, reversed it, and put it back in. This time the blades buzzed to life when he pushed the switch, snicking back and forth so rapidly they were only a blur.

He started for the kitchen door, then made himself switch the gadget off and go back to the counter. He didn't want to waste time putting the battery cover back in place — not when he was primed for battle — but the last bit of sanity still flickering in his mind assured him that he had no choice. If his hand slipped while he was dealing with the thing, the batteries might pop out of the open compartment, and then where would he be? Why, facing the James Gang with an unloaded gun, of course.

So he fiddled the battery cover back on, cursing when it wouldn't fit, and turning it in the other direction.

"You wait for me, now!" he called back over his shoulder. "I'm coming! We're not done yet!"

At last the battery cover snapped down. Howard strode briskly back through the living room with the hedge clippers held at port arms. His hair still stood up in punk-rock quills and spikes. His shirt — now torn out under one arm and burned in several places — flapped about his round, tidy stomach. His bare feet slapped on the linoleum. The tattered remains of his nylon socks swung and dangled about his ankles.

Feeny yelled through the door, "I called them, you Jewish asshole! I called the cops, and I hope the ones who show up are bog-trotting Irishmen, just like me!"

"Blow it out your old tan tail pipe," Howard said, but he was really paying no attention to Feeny. Dennis Feeny was in another universe; this was just his quacking, unimportant voice coming over the subether.

Howard stood to one side of the bathroom door, looking like a cop in a TV show . . . only, someone had handed him the wrong prop, and he was packing a hedge clipper instead of a .38. He pressed his thumb firmly on the power button set high on the handle of the hedge clippers. He took a deep breath . . . and the voice of sanity, now down to a mere gleam, offered a final thought before packing up for good.

Are you sure you want to trust your life to a pair of electric hedge clippers you bought on sale?

"I have no choice," Howard muttered, smiling tightly, and lunged inside.

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The finger was still there, still arced out of the sink in the stiff curve that reminded Howard of a New Year's Eve party favor, the kind that makes a farting, honking sound and then unrolls toward the unsuspecting bystander when you blow on it. It had filched one of Howard's loafers. It was picking the shoe up and slamming it petulantly down on the tiles again and again. From the look of the towels scattered about, Howard guessed the finger had tried to kill several of those before finding the shoe.

A weird joy suddenly suffused Howard — it felt as if the inside of his aching, woozy head had been filled with green light.

"*Here I am, you shmuck!*" he yelled. "*Come and get me!*"

The finger popped out of the shoe, rose in a monstrous ripple of joints (Howard could actually hear some of the knuckles cracking), and floated rapidly through the air toward him. Howard turned on the hedge clippers, and they buzzed into hungry life. So far, so good.

The burned, blistered tip of the finger floated a foot in front of his face, the split nail weaving mystically back and forth. Howard lunged for it. The finger feinted to the left and slipped around his left ear. The pain was amazing. Howard simultaneously felt and heard a gristly ripping sound as the finger tried to tear his ear from the side of his head. He leaped forward, seized the finger in his left fist, and sheared through it. The clippers lugged down as the blades hit the bone, the high buzzing of the motor becoming a rough growl, but it had been built to clip through small, tough branches, and there was really no problem. No problem at all. This was Round Two, this was Double Jeopardy, where the scores could *really* change, and Howard Mitla was racking up a bundle. Blood flew in a fine haze, and then the stump pulled back. Howard blundered after it, the last ten inches of the finger hanging from his ear like a coat hanger for a moment before dropping off.

The finger lunged at him. Howard ducked, and it went over his head. It was blind, of course. That was his advantage. Grabbing his ear like that had just been a lucky shot. He lunged with the clippers, a gesture that looked almost like a fencing thrust, and sheared another two feet from the finger. It thumped to the tiles and lay there, twitching.

Now the rest of it was trying to pull back.

"No, you don't," Howard panted. "No, you don't, not at *all!*"

He ran for the sink, slipped in a puddle of blood, almost fell, then caught his balance. The finger was blurring back down the drain, knuckle

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after knuckle, like a freight train going into a tunnel. Howard seized it, tried to hold it, and couldn't — it went sliding through his hand like a greased length of clothesline. He sliced forward again nevertheless, and managed to cut off the last three feet of the thing just above the point where it was whizzing through his fist.

He leaned over the sink (holding his breath this time) and stared down into the blackness of the drain. Again he caught just a glimpse of retreating white.

"*Come on back anytime!*" Howard Mitla shouted. "*Come back anytime at all! I'll be right here, waiting for you!*"

He turned around, releasing his breath in a gasp. The room still smelled of drain cleaner. Couldn't have that, not while there was still work to do. There was a wrapped cake of Dial soap behind the hot-water tap. Howard picked it up and threw it at the bathroom window. It broke the glass and lodged in the crisscross of mesh behind it. He remembered putting that mesh in — remembered how proud of it he had been. He, Howard Mitla, mild-mannered accountant, had been TAKING CARE OF THE OLD HOMESTEAD. Now he knew what TAKING CARE OF THE OLD HOMESTEAD was really all about. Had there been a time when he had been afraid to go into the bathroom because he thought there might be a mouse in the tub, and he would have to beat it to death with a broom handle? He believed so, but that time — and that version of Howard Mitla — seemed long ago now.

He looked slowly around the bathroom. It was a mess. Pools of blood and two chunks of finger lay on the floor. Another leaned askew in the basin. Fine sprays of blood fanned across the walls and stippled the bathroom mirror. The basin was streaked with it.

"All right," Howard sighed. "Cleanup time, boys and girls." He turned the hedge clippers on again and began to saw the various lengths of finger he had cut off into pieces small enough to flush down the toilet.

THE POLICEMAN was young, and he *was* Irish — O'Bannion was his name. By the time he finally arrived at the closed door of the Mitla apartment, several tenants were standing behind him in a little knot. With the exception of Dennis Feeny, who wore an expression of high outrage, they all looked worried.

O'Bannion knocked on the door, then rapped, and finally hammered.

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"You better break it down," Mrs. Javier said. "I heard him all the way up on the seventh floor."

"The man's insane," Feeny said. "Probably killed his wife."

"No," said Mrs. Dettlebaum. "I saw her leave this morning, just like always."

"Doesn't mean she didn't come back again, does it?" Mr. Feeny asked truculently, and Mrs. Dettlebaum subsided.

"Mr. Mitter?" O'Bannion called.

"It's *Mitla*," Mrs. Dettlebaum said. "With an *l*."

"Oh crap," O'Bannion said, and hit the door with his shoulder. It burst open, and he went inside, closely followed by Mr. Feeny. "You stay here, sir," O'Bannion instructed.

"The hell I will," Feeny said. He was looking into the kitchen, with its strew of implements on the floor and the splatters of vomit on the kitchen cabinets. His eyes were small and bright and interested. "The guy's my neighbor. And after all, I was the one who made the call."

"I don't care if you were on your own private hot line to the pope," O' Bannion said. "Get the hell out of here, or you're going down to the station with this guy Mittle."

"Mit*la*," Feeny said, and slunk unwillingly toward the door to the hallway, casting glances back at the kitchen as he went.

O'Bannion had sent Feeny back mostly because he didn't want Feeny to see how nervous he was. The mess in the kitchen was one thing. The way the place smelled was another — some sort of chemistry-lab stink on top, some other smell underneath it. He was pretty sure the underneath smell was blood.

He glanced behind him to make sure that Feeny had gone back all the way — that he was not lingering in the foyer where the coats were hung —and then he advanced slowly across the living room. When he was beyond the view of the onlookers, he unsnapped the strap across the butt of his pistol and drew it. He went to the kitchen and looked all the way in. Empty. A mess, but empty. And . . . what was that splattered across the cabinets? He wasn't sure, but judging by the smell —

A noise from behind him, a little shuffling sound, broke the thought off, and he turned quickly, bringing up his gun.

"Mr. Mitla?"

There was no answer, but the little shuffling sound came again. From

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down the hall. That meant the bathroom or the bedroom. Officer O'Bannion advanced in that direction, raising his gun and pointing its muzzle at the ceiling. He was now carrying it in much the same way Howard had carried the hedge clippers.

The bathroom door was ajar. O'Bannion was quite sure that this was where the sound had come from, and he knew it was where the worst of the smell was coming from. He crouched, then pushed the door open with the muzzle of his gun.

"Oh my God," he said softly.

The bathroom looked like a slaughterhouse after a busy day. Blood sprayed the walls and ceiling in fine bursts of spatter. There were puddles of blood on the floor, and more blood had run down the inside and outside curves of the bathroom basin in thick trails; that was where the worst of it appeared to be. He could see a broken window, a discarded bottle of what appeared to be drain cleaner (which would explain the awful smell in here), and a pair of men's loafers lying quite a distance apart from each other. One of them was quite badly scuffed.

And, as the door swung wider, he saw the man.

Howard Mitla had crammed himself as far into the space between the bathtub and the wall as he could get when he had finished his disposal operation. He had the electric hedge clippers on his lap, but the batteries were flat; bone was a little tougher than branches, after all, it seemed. His hair still stood up in its wild punk-rock spikes. His cheeks and brow were smeared with bright streaks of blood. His eyes were wide, but almost totally empty — it was an expression Officer O'Bannion associated with speed freaks and crackheads.

Holy Jesus, he thought. *The guy was right — he DID kill his wife. He killed somebody, at least. Where's the body?*

He glanced toward the tub, but couldn't see in. It was the most likely place, but it also seemed to be the one object in the room that wasn't streaked and splattered with gore.

"Mr. Mitla?" he asked. He wasn't pointing his gun directly at Howard, but the muzzle was most certainly in the neighborhood.

"Yes, that's my name," Howard said in a hollow, courteous voice. "Howard Mitla, CPA, at your service. Did you come to use the toilet? Go right ahead. There's nothing to disturb you now. I think that problem's been taken care of. At least for the time being."

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"Uh, would you mind getting rid of the weapon, sir?"

"Weapon?" Howard looked at him vacantly for a moment, then seemed to understand. "These?" He raised the hedge clippers, and the muzzle of Officer O'Bannion's gun for the first time came to rest on Howard himself.

"Yes, sir."

"Sure," Howard said. He tossed the clippers indifferently into the bathtub. There was a clatter as the battery hatch popped out. "Doesn't matter. The batteries are flat anyway. Go ahead. Use the toilet if you want. But *I* wouldn't."

"You wouldn't?" Now that the man was disarmed, O'Bannion wasn't sure exactly how to proceed. It would have been a lot easier if the victim were on view. He supposed he'd better cuff the guy and then call for backup. All he knew for sure was that he wanted to get out of this smelly, creepy bathroom. *About three gallons of blood splashed around the place, the guy invites me to water my dog, for Christ's sake.*

"No," Howard said. "I have reconsidered my original offer. After all, there are five fingers on a hand . . . just *one* hand, mind you . . . and . . . have you ever considered how many holes there are in an ordinary bathroom, my friend? Counting the holes in the faucets, that is? I made it seven." Howard paused and then added, "Seven is a prime — which is to say, a number divisible only by one and itself."

"Would you want to hold out your hands for me, sir?" Officer O'Bannion said, taking his handcuffs from his belt.

"Vi says I know all the answers," Howard said, "but Vi's wrong." He slowly held out his hands.

O'Bannion knelt before him and quickly snapped a cuff on Howard's right wrist. "Who's Vi?"

"My wife," Howard said. His blank, shining eyes looked directly into Officer O'Bannion's. "She's never had any problem going to the bathroom while someone else is in the room, you know. She could probably go while *you* were in the room."

Officer O'Bannion began to have a terrible yet weirdly plausible idea: that this strange little man had killed his wife with a pair of hedge clippers, and then somehow dissolved her body with drain cleaner — and all because she wouldn't get the hell out of the bathroom while the poor fruitcake was trying to drain the dragon.

He snapped the other cuff on.

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"Did you kill your wife, Mr. Mitla?"

For a moment, Howard looked almost surprised. Then he lapsed back into that queer, plastic state of apathy again. "No," he said. "Vi's at Dr. Stone's. They're pulling a complete set of uppers. Vi says it's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it. Why would I kill Vi?"

Now that he had the cuffs on the guy, O'Bannion felt a little better, a little more in control of the situation. "Well, it looks like you offed *someone.*"

"It was just a finger," Howard said. He was still holding his hands out in front of him. Light twinkled and ran along the chain between the handcuffs like liquid silver. "But there are more fingers than one on a hand. And what about the hand's *owner?*" Howard's eyes shifted around the bathroom, which was now filling up with shadows again. "I told it to come back anytime," Howard whispered, "but I was hysterical. I have decided I . . . I am not capable. It grew, you see. It grew when it hit the air."

Something suddenly splashed inside the closed toilet. Howard's eyes shifted in that direction. So did Officer O'Bannion's. The splash came again. It sounded big . . . as if a trout had jumped in there.

"No, I most definitely *wouldn't* use the toilet," Howard said. "I'd hold it if I were you, Officer. I'd hold it just as long as I possibly could, and then use the alley beside the building."

O'Bannion shivered.

You get hold of yourself, boyo, he told himself sternly. *You get hold of yourself, or you'll wind up as nutty as this guy.*

He got up to check the toilet.

"Bad idea," Howard said. He was still holding his hands out in front of him. "A *really* bad idea."

"What exactly happened in here, Mr. Mitla?" O'Bannion asked. "And what have you stored in the toilet?"

"What happened? It was like . . . like. . . ." Howard trailed off, and then began to smile. It was a relieved smile . . . but his eyes kept creeping back to the closed lid of the toilet. "It was like a 'Jeopardy' game." he said. "In fact, it was like *Final* Jeopardy. The category is The Inexplicable. The Final Jeopardy answer is , 'Because they can.' Do you know what the Final Jeopardy question is, Officer?"

Fascinated, unable to take his eyes from Howard's, Officer O'Bannion shook his head.

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"The Final Jeopardy question," Howard said in a voice that was cracked and roughened from screaming, "is: 'Why do terrible things like cancer and murder and fingers in the drain sometimes happen to the nicest people?' *That's* the Final Jeopardy question. It's all going to take a lot of thought. But I have plenty of time. As long as I stay away from the . . . the holes."

The splash came again. It was heavier this time. The vomitous toilet seat bumped sharply up and down. Officer O'Bannion got up, walked over, and bent down toward it. Howard looked at him with some interest.

"Final Jeopardy, Officer," said Howard Mitla. "How much do you wish to wager?"

O'Bannion thought about it for a moment . . . then grasped the toilet seat and wagered it all.

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There is a huge amount of published material about Stephen King, ranging from fan interviews to a Time *cover story (October 6, 1986). This illuminating essay offers some fresh insights from the perspective of a critic who has reviewed King for mainstream media and who also happens to be F&SF's Books Editor.*

Stephen King

By Algis Budrys

I FIRST HEARD of Stephen King — heard of him so I remembered — in 1980, when the Chicago *Sun-Times* asked me to review *Firestarter*. I had heard of *Carrie*, of course, but I hadn't put the two together. Not that I needed to, because *Carrie*, interesting as it was, or wasn't, represented a minor strain in the mainstream of fantasy. Though it was, apparently, a book that had appealed to a fair number of people, it couldn't be intrinsically different from, for instance, William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*, or Thomas Tryon's *The Other*.

That is, it didn't belong, really, in the — to repeat myself — mainstream of what the fantasy writers I recognized as fantasy writers were doing, and so it was just a freak, and in due course would go away. I didn't even know about *'Salem's Lot*, or *The Shining*, or *The Stand*, or *The Dead Zone*, which had further intervened between *Carrie* and *Firestarter*. Again, I may have heard of them; I may not. So the first six years of Stephen King's career as a novelist were — and, in a sense, are — lost on me.

So of course I knew nothing of the writing for *Cavalier* and other places, for years before that. As far as I personally was concerned, Stephen King was an unknown quantity until I picked up *Firestarter*.

Well, I forget precisely what I

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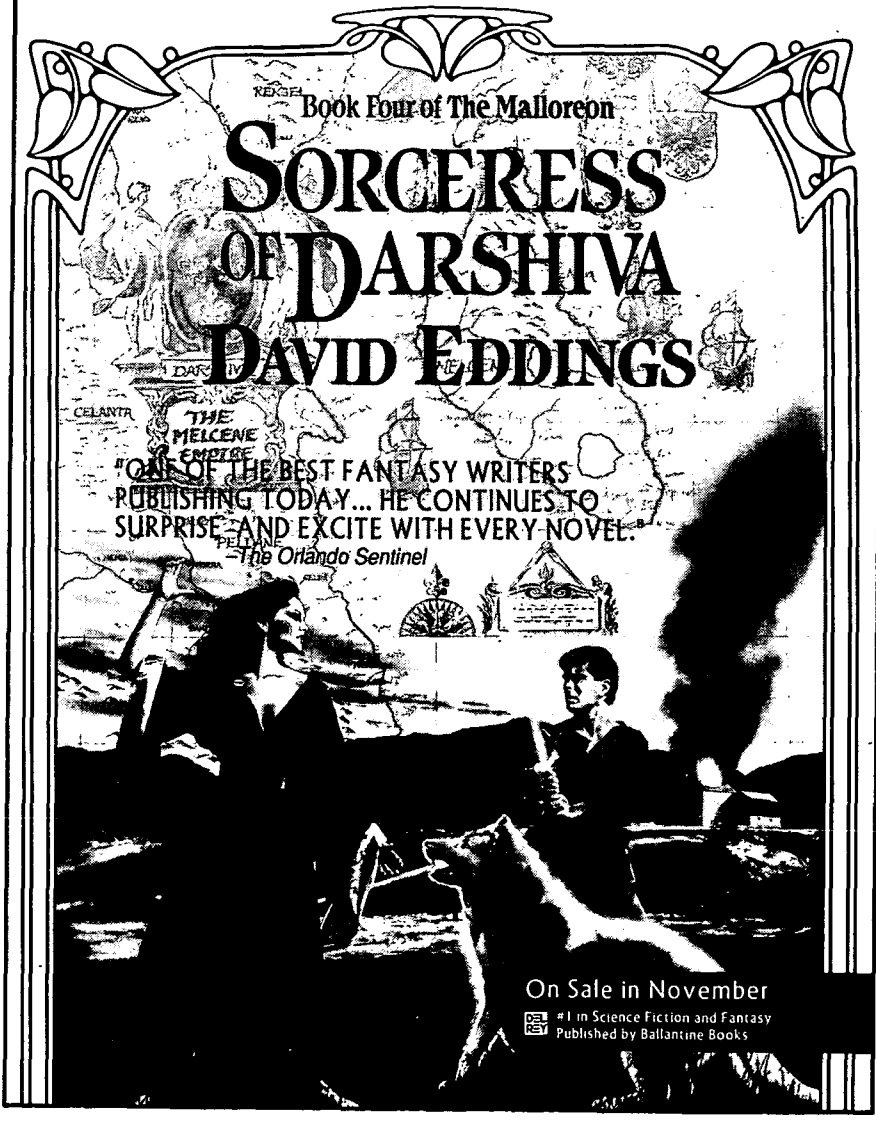

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said about it. But as I dimly recall, I said it was better than average in some ways, but not in others; that by and large it was good where it had to be good, but bad in detail. And that in a way, I was impressed.

In short, I was punting. I still didn't consider King a member of the establishment; more important, he struck me as not notably more apt than Blatty or Tryon, whom I considered barely acceptable, and I didn't see what the excitement was about, for the most part. And in fact if I had been reviewing him for *F&SF* instead of the Chicago *Sun-Times*, I probably would have gone on about that at greater length.

But a funny thing happened over the next couple of years. For one thing, I reviewed *Cujo* for the *Sun-Times*, and rather liked it — though you might have had trouble guessing that from the review — and I read *Danse Macabre*, King's nonfiction homage to all the horror films he'd ever seen, reviewing it for *F&SF*, I believe, and I reviewed *Christine*, and I reviewed *Different Seasons* for both *F&SF* and the *Sun-Times*. And I reviewed *The Talisman* and *Skeleton Crew* and *It* and *Misery*, and suddenly I was accounted a Stephen King expert. Which I guess I am, t hough I am certainly not the world's leading authority or anything close to it — and the question that comes to mind is, So what about it?

Which is an interesting question, when you get right down to it, because Stephen King is beyond criticism. He makes too much money to be criticized; money which comes out of the pockets of the reading public, hardly anywhere else, so that any critic, myself merely included, is crying in the face of a very big wind indeed if he tries to get a word in edgewise. And yet . . . .

And yet Stephen King does something hardly any other writer does; he chooses to appear in *F&SF*, something that did not happen until he was launched into much wider waters. It is an honor he does us. So how to explain Stephen King at all? A writer who has made it all the way, if you count money as making it all the way, and then turns to *F&SF*.

Well, I have a theory. I think Stephen King is trying to do it all —gather up the megapublic, and gather up the much smaller public of *F&SF*, and quite possibly quite a few other publics in between. And he wants to make megamoney — face it; few of us do not — and he makes it so copiously that he can afford to also keep the *F&SF* public satisfied, and all the other publics in between. And once in a while —once in a great while, but then,

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for most of us it happens not at all — he is obviously among those of whom it can be said, in a careless moment, that he is sometimes as good a writer as there is alive. Which is not something the writer does for any public; a public of some sort benefits, but he or she does *that* for themselves.

Let me get a running start on this. Somewhere in the early days, before anyone much had heard of him — probably before *Cavalier* — Stephen King reached the conscious decision to modify his writing style, so as to make money. And this had startling if in a sense imponderable consequences.

It does not matter for our present purposes whether he was simply right or complexly right; whether the style he modified from was indeed too fine or too abstract or too elevated in some other way, but was basically right, or whether the style he modified from was a piece of cheese. He did modify it, and you can tell he modified it from such surviving fragments as the Hearst Shifter story incorporated into "The Body." Unfortunately, that is all you can tell from such pieces; that there was a time when Stephen King had a style significantly different from any style he uses today. Because there is more to it than there would be in the case of the average or even merely extraordinary writer, for whom style is a matter of word choice. For Stephen King, the over-riding factor in his "style" is a matter of plot choice — the words follow from the choice of plot, which means, since he has about six radically different plots, six more or less different sets of word-choices.

First of all, there are the pieces like *Cujo*, in that they have a relatively restricted cast and no supernatural element; just a rabid dog and the few people he comes in contact with. Then we have *Carrie* and *Firestarter*, which are a natural pair in many ways. Then we have *It*, which is a large-cast novel in which evil haunts a town, as distinguished from the personal supernatural power of *Carrie* and *Firestarter*, who would like nothing so much as to be left alone. And *Christine*, in which evil haunts a particular person, although there are some questions left unanswered in the book. Then we have *Misery*, in which we have no supernatural element, but the person doing the evil is demented long before the book opens, and is a fully rounded character, as Cujo the Saint Bernard could not be. And the "hero" of *The Shining*, who is like Cujo in a sense, but is driven mad by supernatural influences.

For each of these categories, King

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uses a different writing style. In some cases, it does not appear much different, but the differences do exist, and are crucial in many respects.

In *Cujo*, for instance, he uses a style very much like that of John D. MacDonald, whereas the style of *It* is a much looser, much more episodic style. Then, in *Christine*, we see the same style as in *It*, but with the cast as relatively small as it is, we get a much more focused effect. *Carrie* and *Firestarter*, however, are even leaner, despite their somewhat larger casts; the effect is of any one of a number of cloak-and-dagger writers without quite the discipline to tell a really tightly plotted tale; say, Howard Hunt, for want of a better name.

And so forth. It is not surprising to me that Richard Bachman was not widely known as a Stephen King pen name; although all the styles share at least one idiosyncrasy, they have more than enough differences between them so that it would, from a standing start, be very difficult to tell that they all came from the same brain.

The fact is, King apparently has no style of his own most of the time. And I don't think this is unconscious — though I wouldn't bet too much, if I were you. I think the likeliest hypothesis is that King deliberately selects the style that will go best with the idea to hand, and stays with that style through most — or in the case of his most critically successful books, all — of the way to the end of the manuscript. There is no such thing as *the* Stephen King style.

There *are* common idiosyncrasies. For instance, there is a persistant sort of dyslexia. In *Cujo*, the Ford Pinto breaks down in Cujo's yard because of a (characteristic) weakness in the carburetor needle valve spring. But in fact, Pintos didn't have spring-loaded needle valves. In *It*, the town, in the 1920s, wipes out a gang of bank robbers, using Garand rifles — which wouldn't be invented for ten more years. And again, and again, King makes the same sort of mistake. In the novelette in *Skeleton Crew* where the hero and the girl have to get out of the beseiged supermarket, they do make it, to his four-door Scout vehicle, which is the neatest trick of all in the story, since International made only two-door Scouts, and is the only company to have made Scouts.

He seems, in short, to have the feeling that the reader demands circumstantial detail, and supplies the detail, but doesn't bother to research the detail. My favorite example, as matter of fact, is the Hearst Shifter, in a story-within-the-story about stock car racing, which ignores the fact that the (jus-

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tifiably) famous shifter conversion kit is made by Hurst.

Oddly enough, another gaffe in *It* is no gaffe at all — Schwinn did make a tubeless tire bike before the Big War, which I would have sworn was impossible had I not, at the last moment before filing my review, called Schwinn just to make sure. That it did not go very fast —which it is crucial to the plot that it does — is beyond criticism; the kid propelling it was very scared, at that moment, and it seems to me a writer can be allowed that.

But one swallow does not make a summer. No matter which basic writing style he is using, the fact is that this unfortunate peculiarity will tend to crop up. But it is not crucial, is not too frequent, and will not fully serve to identify a Stephen King story.

Well, what will? That is my basic point; nothing really, beyond a shadow of a doubt, will.

IN *SKELETON Crew*, there is a pair of short stories involving a panel delivery truck. It is possible to say that one is a sequel to the other. Stephen King's name is of course signed to both. Other than that, they are remarkably dissimilar. One is a straightforward account — and a remarkably good story. The other is as if written by another hand entirely, impressionistic and surrealistic, and is not, I think, quite as much a success on its own terms. The larger point being that one doesn't usually see two stories in a series in which the writer stayed the same but his head didn't. In fact, the stories in *Skeleton Crew* are (1) almost all good, (2) all over the lot as far as style goes; it's in these two stories, which are the only two stories that share many elements, that one sees it plainest.

But the most plain statement comes in *Different Seasons*, with its four stories — "Apt Pupil," "The Breathing Method," "The Body," and one other whose name I disremember unless it's "Shawshank Rebellion," but is the one about the prison break tunnel concealed behind the poster of a film star.

Four more different stories would be difficult to put between one set of covers, and I strongly suspect that if any lesser name than Stephen King's were involved, they wouldn't have been. "The Breathing Method" is a Lovecraftian (or a Blochian) melodrama; "Shawshank Rebellion" (or whatever) is circumstantial and nonsupernatural, and "Apt Pupil" is Stephen King — or Peter Straub, or Clive Barker, or any one of a half-dozen other of the boys — at the top of his form; point being, it isn't so much his form as a generic style that could be picked up at

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any time by any number of writers. But "The Body". . . .

"The Body" is one of the best pieces of twentieth century short fiction extant, and that now covers damned near ninety years. (Several months more than 90 years, if you're careless about when centuries begin.) No ifs, ands, or buts. It would be even better if Stephen King hadn't chosen to include in the text of "The Body" a couple of short stories he could sell in no other way — I assume that's what accounts for their inclusion — but it is, no question, one of the best nevertheless.

"The Body," in case you don't know, concerns itself with the journey, overland, of a group of Maine schoolboys to view a body found but not yet widely reported along a railroad track. The body is that of a boy roughly their own age, but otherwise completely strange to them, and there is no reason for them to go, but they do. And the story is in the journey, as this long short story unwinds, and of what it makes of them. I won't tell you much more about it; find it and read it. If you thought you knew Stephen King well enough, think again.

Like all really good short stories, it doesn't, at first glance, seem to be about very much. As the incidents pile up, you realize it's about a great deal. The point is, very early in the game you stop realizing you're reading a Stephen King story. You stop realizing you're reading a story at all. Which is the hardest trick in the book for a writer to pull off consistently, let alone over the span of as long a short story as this one.

I can't tell you much about the quality of the prose, because there isn't any. The text is perfectly transparent, and I suspect one of two things — *this* is the "natural" style of Stephen King, which he would use all the time if he could, or (but could any writer be *this* talented?), it is simply another of the styles he has, suited to this particular story, and if he ever thinks of another story like it, he will use it again, and not before.

Let's clear some underbrush. First of all, Peter Straub, Clive Barker and the rest are not in it with King. I don't care who says what, even if it's King himself — nobody else has as broad a range, is as inventive, continues to invent, as King himself. It is very likely that he is the best horror writer who ever lived, to the point where it is as if he had invented the genre, so that all others, no matter how good, are in some sense imitations, no matter how good.

Second, this is not an unmixed blessing. One of the things that Stephen King as good as invented is that in horror fiction, the god in the car is back.

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Let me explain. In all other forms of fiction that I know of, a fundamental change came over drama with the passing of pantheism; the hero had to solve his own problem, with the resources noted or implied at the beginning of the story, because whether he is the victim of predestination or has free will, God remains enigmatic and aloof.

That we are uncomfortable with this situation, I have no doubt. The Roman Catholic religion, and several others, have tried very hard to make something special of Mary, and of the Holy Ghost (while pretending to concentrate their efforts on Jesus). (A lot of Protestant religions, on the other hand, barely distinguish between Jesus and God.) But when the dust settles, God nevertheless stands alone — and aloof. And, make of this what you will, a clear majority of horror writers are present-day or former Roman Catholics, which is not true of the majority of science fiction writers and writers of other forms of fantasy.

Under pantheism, on the other hand, you typically have not only a rather extensive pantheon of primary deities, you have their bastard children as demigods; you have nature spirits, such as Satyrs, roaming the landscape; and more restricted spirits, such as dryads and naiads, all over the place. In fact, it must have been something of a disappointment to the average Greek to discover that he, unlike the bulk of his fellows, had no God-blood or special quality at all, and would have to go through life just coping. But when he went to the theater, inevitably he saw the gods interfering with the lives of mere humans freely and often, as was only natural. Life was a process of humans picking their way through a minefield, and even the best grade of virtue was ineffectual in protecting them beyond a shadow of a doubt; you could get it in the neck at any time, because the gods were numerous and not at all reluctant to mix in. On the other hand, you *might* get away with quite a bit, because even Jove nodded from time to time.

It was, in short, a more complicated scheme. Stephen King was, I think, the writer to make exploiting it popular after centuries of neglect. One thing stands out above all others in a Stephen King story with the slightest supernatural element in it: There ain't no justice.

Not a jot, not a tittle. If it's fantasy, part of the fantasy is that humans are essentially helpless pawns in a much larger game being played for unimaginable stakes.

I report this fact, I don't judge it. I think it may reflect a certain discomfort with monotheism, really, but I don't think that's necessarily

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bad — or good. It is effective, in a way, just as it was in Lovecraft, the difference being only that King is ever so much more on the public stage. But the important thing about it, from this narrow point of view I have adopted for a moment, is that King seems to shift effortlessly between it and the "conventional" one — that is, that cause and effect are explicable. "The Body" will not work if they are inexplicable. On the other hand, "Apt Pupil" will not work if they are not. So what we have in King is a writer who consciously, deliberately writes either way — and, in effect, brought one of the ways out of the closet in the first place.

That's good. What's not so good is the fact that book after book —*It*, *Misery*, and *Christine*, for three — make no sense either way, after an auspicious start. King has a habit of raising fascinating questions but not always answering them, and in these three books — and in quite a few short stories that I know of, and doubtless quite a few others that I don't, as well as in novels I haven't read — the flaw is fatal from a reviewer's point of view. In *It*, the menace is so terrifying, so multifarious, so omnipresent, that to discover it is merely a giant spider is to discover, instead, that King didn't *know* what his payoff was going to be, and kept writing until he had to have a payoff of some kind. In *Misery*, the entire premise of the book is undermined at the last instance. In *Christine*, much the same thing occurs.

A bottom line on King is that he is almost totally undisciplined in the one place where a reviewer would have trouble forgiving him. And I do, indeed, have trouble forgiving him; a writer ought to play by the rules, if only the rules of the moment, and King not only does not, he doesn't seem to give a damn. Another bottom line on King is that he only pretends to do research. Yet another is that obviously he cares for money to some large extent — though I hesitate over this last sin; I think, on reconsideration, that he is trapped by the habit of writing, and it can hardly be counted against him if this brings him continual gouts of fresh cash.

Do I think he is now in the mainstream of fantasy writers? No, I still don't. For one thing, the readiness with which he shifts in and out of fantasy while continuing to write horror argues against this. Rather, I think he has founded his own genre — and been followed into it by scores of other writers — and while it overlaps fantasy a lot of the time, what matters is the horror. The little movie-going boy of long ago does not care how you get that special horripilating thrill

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— it's the thrill that counts. And I think that while this means a new genre *has* been created, I think it essentially does not invent new fantasy ideas. I think it occasionally makes stunningly effective use of standard fantasy ideas; I also think it's essentially irrelevent to fantasy.

Most of all, I think that trapped inside King is one of the finest writers of our time. I think he understands that, though he may be wrong about when and where that writer emerges, and he may or, more likely, may not, understand what he gave up in order to be a money-maker on this gigantic scale. Most of all, I think he has done an almost unthinkable thing; he has not narrowed down, but rather has expanded the definition of what he is as a writer, to the point where he can say, as no one else can, that he has tried everything, and made it work in some sense.

True, he has been helped immeasurably by the fact that once the audience had gotten in the habit of supporting him, it will take a series of failures before it withdraws its endorsement. But he is getting beyond that, too; it is getting to be impossible to be sure that a Stephen King book *is* a failure. I think in the end that may be Stephen King's greatest achievement; he is the first writer, ever, to have truly baffled the critics.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: Roland of Gilead, the last gunslinger in a strange and exhausted world that bears some similarity to our own, is the central character in two novels, The Gunslinger *and* The Drawing of the Three. *Maimed and infected, he nevertheless succeeds in drawing three people from our own world to help him go forward in his quest. Eddie Dean, from the New York of 1986, is a wisemouthed, streetwise heroin addict. Odetta Holmes is a wheelchair-bound black civil rights activist from the New York of 1964. And hiding within Odetta is another woman: Detta Walker, a dangerous creature filled with hate and guile.*

At the conclusion of The Drawing of the Three, *Roland forced Odetta/Detta to a realization of her dual nature. The two aspects of her personality merge, and she becomes a third woman: Susannah Dean, the wife (without benefit of clergy) of Eddie, with whom she has fallen in love. These three — Eddie, Susannah, and Roland of Gilead — will soon press on in search of the Dark Tower, the mysterious nexus of all worlds, and the Grail that Roland has pursued all his life. First, however, comes a time of healing for Roland . . . and learning for his new companions. But even as Roland's body heals, he becomes aware of another threat, this one to his mind and sanity.*

What follows is the first section of The Dark Tower III: The Waste Lands. *It opens roughly five weeks following the conclusion of* The Drawing of the Three.

The Waste Lands *will be published in 1991 or 1992 by Donald M. Grant.*

THE BEAR

By Stephen King

1.

IT WAS HER THIRD TIME with live ammunition . . . and her first time on the draw from the holster Roland had rigged for her.

They had plenty of live rounds; Roland had brought back better than three hundred from the world where Eddie and Susannah Dean had lived

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their lives up until the time of their drawing. But having ammunition in plenty did not mean it could be wasted; quite the contrary, in fact. The gods frowned upon wastrels. Roland had been raised, first by his father and then by Cort, his greatest teacher, to believe this, and so he still believed. Those gods might not punish at once, but sooner or later the penance would have to be paid . . . and the longer the wait, the greater the weight.

And at first there had been no need for live ammunition, anyway. Roland had been shooting for more years than the beautiful brown-skinned woman in the wheelchair would believe. He had corrected her at first simply by watching her aim and dry-fire at the targets he had set up. She learned fast. Both she and Eddie learned fast.

As he suspected, they were born gunslingers.

Today Roland and Susannah had come to a clearing less than a mile from where they had made camp, the place where they had been living for over a month now. The days passed with their own sweet similarity. The gunslinger's body healed itself while Eddie and Susannah learned the things the gunslinger had to teach them: how to shoot, how to hunt, how to gut and clean what they had killed; how to first stretch and then tan and cure the hides of those kills; how to use as much as it was possible to use so that no part of the animal was wasted; how to find north by the Old Star; how to listen to the forest in which they now found themselves, some sixty miles to the north and east of the Western Sea. Today Eddie had stayed behind, and the gunslinger was not put out of countenance by this in the least. The lessons that are remembered the longest, Roland knew, are most often self-taught.

But what had always been the most important lesson was still most important: how to shoot and how to hit what you shot at every time. How to kill.

The edges of this clearing had been formed by dark, sweet-smelling fir trees that curved around the place in a ragged semicircle. To the south the ground broke off and dropped three hundred feet in a series of crumbling shale ledges and fractured cliffs, like a giant's set of stairs. A clear stream ran out of the woods and across the center of the clearing, first bubbling through a deep channel in the spongy earth and friable stone, then pouring across the splintery rock floor that sloped down to the place where the land dropped away.

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The water descended the steps in a series of waterfalls and made any number of pretty, wavering rainbows. Beyond the edge of the drop-off was a magnificent deep valley, choked with more firs and a few great old elm trees that refused to be crowded out. These latter towered green and lush, trees that might have been old when the land from which Roland had come was yet young; he could see no sign that the valley had ever burned, although he supposed it must have drawn the lightning at some time or other. Nor would lightning have been the only danger. There had been people in this forest in some distant time; Roland had dug up their leavings on several occasions over the past weeks. They were primitive artifacts, for the most part, but they included shards of pottery that could only have been cast in fire. And fire was evil stuff. It delighted in escaping the hands that created it.

Above this picture-book scene arched a blameless blue sky in which a few crows circled some miles off, crying in their old, rusty voices. They seemed restless, as if a storm was on the way, but Roland had sniffed the air, and there was no rain in it.

A boulder stood at the left side of the stream. On it, Roland had set up six chips of stone. Each one was heavily flecked with mica, and they glittered like lenses in the warm afternoon light.

"Last chance," the gunslinger said. "If that holster's uncomfortable — even the slightest bit — tell me now. We didn't come here to waste ammunition."

She cocked a sardonic eye at him, and for a moment he could see a flicker of Detta Walker in there. It was like hazy sunlight winking off a bar of steel. "What would you do if it *was* uncomfortable and I didn't tell you? If I missed all six of those itty-bitty things? Whip me upside the head like that old teacher of yours used to do?"

The gunslinger smiled. He had done more smiling these past five weeks than he had done in the five years that had come before them. "I can't do that, and you know it. We were children, for one thing — children who hadn't been through our rites of manhood yet. You may slap a child to correct him, or her, but —"

"In my world, whoppin' on the kiddies is frowned on by the better class of people," Susannah said dryly.

Roland shrugged. It was hard for him to imagine that sort of world — did not the Great Book say, "Spare not the birch so you spoil not the child?"

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— but he didn't believe Susannah was lying. "Your world has not moved on," he said. "Many things are different there. Did I not see for myself that it is so?"

"I guess you did."

"In any case, you and Eddie are not children. It would be wrong for me to treat you as if you were. And if tests were needed, you both passed them."

Although he did not say so, he was thinking of how it had ended on the beach, when she had blown three of the lumbering lobstrosities to hell before they could peel him and Eddie to the bone. He saw her answering smile, and knew she was remembering the same thing.

'So what you goan' do?"

"If you shoot badly? I'll look at you," he said. "I think that's all I'll need to do."

She thought this over, then nodded. "Reckon so."

She tested the gun belt again. It was slung across her bosom almost like a shoulder holster (Roland thought of this arrangement as a docker's clutch), and looked simple enough, but it had taken many weeks of trial and error and a great deal of tailoring to get it just right. The belt — and the heavy revolver that cocked its eroded sandalwood grip out of the ancient oiled holster — had once been the gunslinger's; the holster had hung on his right hip. He had spent much of the past five weeks coming to realize it was never going to hang there again. He was strictly a left-handed gun now, the sort of man who was supposed to be the Devil's vigilante.

Roland did not know if he served the Devil or not. He knew he served the Dark Tower, and that was enough.

"So how is it?" he asked again.

This time she laughed up at him. "Roland, this ole gun belt's as com'fable as it's ever gonna be. Now, do you want me to shoot, or are we just going to sit here and listen to crow music from over yonder?"

He felt tension worming its sharp little fingers under his skin now, and he supposed Cort had felt the same, time and time again, under his gruff, bluff exterior. He wanted her to be good . . . *needed* her to be good. But to show how badly he wanted and needed that could possibly lead to disaster.

"Tell me your lesson again, Susannah."

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She sighed in mock exasperation . . . but as she spoke, her smile faded, and her dark, beautiful face became solemn. And from her lips he heard the old catechism again, made new in her mouth. He had never expected to hear these words from a woman. How natural they sounded . . . and yet how strange.

"'I do not aim with my hand; she who aims with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

"'I aim with my eye.

"'I do not shoot with my hand; she who shoots with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

"'I shoot with my mind.

"'I do not kill with my gun—'"

She broke off and pointed at the twinkling stones on the boulder.

"I'm not going to kill anything, anyhow — they're just itty-bitty *rocks*."

Her expression — a little haughty, a little naughty — suggested that she expected Roland to be exasperated with her, perhaps even angry. Roland, however, had been where she was himself, and he had not forgotten that apprentice gunslingers were fractious, high-spirited creatures, nervy and apt to bite at exactly the wrong moment . . . and he had discovered an unexpected capacity in himself. He could teach. More, he had discovered he *liked* it.

Now more crows began to call raucously, these from the forest behind them. Some part of Roland's mind registered these new cries and their agitated quality; noted that something had scared the birds up and away from whatever they had been feeding on, but he simply filed the information away and focused all his concentration on Susannah. To do otherwise with a 'prentice was to ask for a second, less playful bite. And who would be to blame for that? Who but he, the teacher? For was he not training both of them to bite? Wasn't that what a gunslinger was, when you stripped off the few stern lines of ritual and stilled the few iron grace notes of catechism? Wasn't he (or she) only a human hawk, trained to bite on command?

"No," he said. "They're not rocks."

She raised her eyebrows a little and began to smile again. Now that she saw he wasn't going to explode at her as he sometimes did when she was slow or fractious (or at least not *yet*), her eyes took that mocking sun-on-steel glint he still associated with the murderous Detta Walker.

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"They ain't?" Her voice was teasing.

"No, they *ain't*," he said, returning her mockery. His own smile began to return, but it was hard and humorless. "Susannah, do you remember the *honk mahfahs*?"

Her own smile began to fade.

"Do you remember the *honk mahfahs* in Oxford Town?"

Her smile was gone.

"Do you remember what they did to you? And your friends?"

"That wasn't *me*," she said. "That was another woman." Her eyes had taken on a dull, sullen cast. He didn't like that look, didn't like to hurt her, but he would do what he had to do. As he always had.

"No — that was *you*. Like it or not, that was *you* — that was Odetta Susannah Holmes, daughter of Sarah Walker Holmes. It's not you as you *are*, but you as you *were*. Remember the fire hoses, Susannah? Remember the gold teeth, how you saw them when they used the hoses on you and your friends in Oxford? How you saw them twinkle when they laughed?"

She had told them these things, and many others, over the long nights as the campfire burned low. The gunslinger hadn't understood everything, but he had listened. And learned. And remembered.

"What's wrong with you, Roland? Why you want to go recallin' that trash to my mind?"

Now her smile was all gone. The sullen eyes glinted at him dangerously; they reminded him of Alain's eyes when Alain, good-natured Alain, was finally roused.

"Yonder stones are those men," Roland said softly. "The men who locked you in a cell and left you to foul yourself. The men with the clubs and the dogs. The men who called you a nigger cunt."

He pointed at the stones, moving his finger along them from left to right.

"There's the one that pinched your breast and laughed. There's the one that said he better check and see if you had something stuffed up your ass. There's the one that called you a chimpanzee in a five-hundred-dollar dress. That's the one that kept running his billy club over the spokes of your wheelchair until you thought the sound would drive you mad. There's the one that called your friend Leon *pinko-fag*. And that one on the end, Susannah, that one's Jack Mort, who pushed a brick on your head when you were five and then came back almost twenty years later and

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shoved you in front of a subway train and got your legs chopped off at the knees.

"There. Those stones. *Those men.*"

She was breathing rapidly now, her bosom rising and falling in swift little jerks beneath the gunslinger's gun belt with its heavy freight of bullets. Her eyes had left him; they were looking at the mica-flecked chips of stone.

Behind them and at some distance, a tree splintered, cracked heavily, and fell over. More crows called in the sky. Deep in concentration, deep in the game that was no longer a game, neither of them noticed.

"Oh yeah?" she breathed. "Are they?"

"They are," Roland agreed. "Now say your lesson, Susannah Dean, and be true."

The words fell from her lips in cold little clicks. Her right hand trembled lightly on the arm of her wheelchair like a restless, thrumming engine.

"'I do not aim with my hand; she who aims with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

"'I aim with my eye.'"

"Good."

"'I do not shoot with my hand; she who shoots with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

"'I shoot with my mind.'"

"Good."

"'I do not kill with my gun; she who kills with her gun has forgotten the face of her father.

"'I kill with my heart.'"

"Then KILL them, for your father's sake!" Roland roared. *"KILL THEM ALL!"*

Her right hand was an ebony blur between the arm of the chair and the handle of Roland's great pistol. It was out in a second, her left hand held over the butt and then descending, fanning at the hammer in flutters almost as swift and delicate as the wing of a hummingbird. Six flat cracks peeled off across the valley, and five of the six chips of stone set atop the boulder blinked out of existence.

For a moment neither of them spoke — did not even breathe, it seemed — as the echoes rolled back and forth, dimming. Even the crows were silent, for the time being, at least.

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The gunslinger broke the silence with three toneless yet oddly emphatic words: "It is good."

Susannah looked at the gun in her hand as if she had never seen it before. A small tendril of smoke rose from the barrel, perfectly straight in the windless silence. Then, slowly, she returned it to the holster below her bosom.

"Good, but not perfect," she said at last. "I missed one."

"Did you?" He walked swifly over to the boulder and picked up the remaining chip of stone. He glanced at it, then tossed it to her.

She caught it with her left hand; the right remained near the holstered gun, he saw with approval. She shot better and more naturally than Eddie, but had not learned this particular lesson as swiftly as Eddie had done. If she had been with them during the shoot-out at Balazar's nightclub, she might have. Now, Roland saw, she *was* learning. That was good. She looked at the stone and saw the notch, barely a sixteenth of an inch deep, in its upper corner. Her shot had clipped it going by.

"Not much," Roland said, returning to her, "but in a shooting scrap, a little is sometimes all you need. Just an edge, that's all. If you clip a fellow and throw his aim off. . . ." He paused. "What? Why are you looking at me that way?"

"You don't know, do you? You really don't."

"No," he agreed. "Not at all."

There was no sarcasm or defensiveness in his voice, and Susannah shook her head in exasperation. The rapid turn-and-turn-about dance of her personality unnerved him; his inability to say anything other than the exact truth of what was on his mind never failed to do the same to her. He was the most *literal* man she had ever met.

"All right," she said, "I'll *tell* you why I'm looking at you that way, Roland. Because what you did was a mean trick. You said you wouldn't slap me, *couldn't* slap me, even if I cut up rough . . . but either you lied or you're very stupid, and I *know* you're not stupid, People don't always slap with their hands, as every man and woman of my race could testify. Words are the worst blows. We have a little rhyme where I come from: 'Sticks and stones will break my bones—'"

"'—yet taunts will never wound me,'" Roland finished.

"All right; close enough. It's bullshit no matter what world you say it in. They don't call what you did a tongue-lashing for nothing. Your words

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hurt me, Roland — are you gonna stand there and say you didn't know they would?"

She sat in her chair, looking up at him with bright, stern curiosity, and Roland thought — not for the first time — that the *honk mahfahs* of Susannah's land must have been either very brave or very stupid to cross her, wheelchair or no wheelchair. And, having walked among them, he did not think bravery was the answer.

"I did not think or care about your hurt," he said patiently. "I saw you show your teeth, and knew you meant to bite. So I put a stick in your jaws. And it worked . . . didn't it?"

Her expression was now one of hurt astonishment. "You *bastard!*"

He did not reply, but took the gun from her holster, fumbled the cylinder open with the remaining two fingers on his right hand, and then began to reload the chambers with his left hand.

"How can you possibly justify that sort of high-handed arrogant —"

"You *needed* to bite," he said in that same patient tone. "Had you not, you would have shot all wrong — with your hand and your gun instead of with your eye, your mind, and your heart. Was that a trick? Was it arrogant? I think not. I think, Susannah, that *you* were the one expressing arrogance. I think you were the one with a mind to get up to tricks. That doesn't distress me. Quite the opposite. A gunslinger without teeth is no gunslinger."

"Damn it, I'm *not* a gunslinger!"

He ignored what she said. He could afford to. One look in her eyes told him she knew better. "If we were playing a game, I might have behaved differently. But this is no game. It. . . ."

His good hand went to his forehead for a moment and paused there, fingers tented just above the left temple. The tips of the fingers, she saw, were trembling minutely.

"Roland, what's the matter with you?" she asked quietly.

The hand lowered slowly. He rolled the cylinder back into place and replaced the revolver in the holster she wore. "Nothing."

"Yes. Yes, there is. I've seen it, and Eddie has, too. It started almost as soon as we left the beach. It's something wrong, and it's getting worse. It's not in your body this time, is it? This time the infection's in your mind."

"There is nothing wrong," he repeated.

She put her hands out and took his. Her anger was gone, at least for the time being. She looked earnestly up into his eyes. "Eddie and I . . . this isn't

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our world, Roland. Without you, we'd die here. We'd have your guns, and we can shoot them — you've taught us what we need to know about that — but we'd die just the same. We . . . we depend on you. So tell me what's wrong. Let me try to help. Let *us* try to help."

He had never been a man who understood himself deeply or cared to; the concept of self-analysis, even of self-consciousness, was alien to him. His way was to act — to quickly consult his own interior, utterly mysterious workings, and then to act. Of them all, he had been the most perfectly made, a man whose deeply romantic core was encased in a brutally simple box that consisted of instinct and pragmatism. He took one of those quick looks inside now, and decided to tell her everything. To tell her she was right. There *was* something wrong with his mind. It was as simple and as mysterious as both his nature and the weird wandering life into which that nature had impelled him.

He opened his mouth to say, *I'm losing my mind, Susannah; I'm going insane.* But before he could utter the first word, another tree fell in the forest — it went with a huge, grinding crash. This treefall was closer, and this time they were not deeply engaged in a test of wills masquerading as a lesson. Both heard it, both heard the agitated cawing of the crows that followed it, and both registered the fact that the tree had fallen close to their camp.

Susannah had looked in the direction of the sound, but now her eyes, wide and dismayed, returned to the gunslinger's face. "Eddie!" she said.

A cry suddenly rose in the deep green fastnesses of the woods in back of them — a vast cry of primordial rage. Another tree went . . . and then another. They fell in what sounded like a hail of mortar fire. *Dry wood,* the gunslinger thought. *Dead trees.*

"*Eddie!*" This time she screamed it. "Whatever it is, *it's near Eddie!*" Her hands flew to the wheels of her chair and began the laborious job of turning it around.

"No time for that." Roland seized her under her arms and pulled her free. It was done in an instant. He had carried her before when the going was too rough for her wheelchair — both men had — but she was still amazed by his uncanny, ruthless speed. At one moment she was in her wheelchair, an item that had been purchased in New York City's finest ostomy supply house in the fall of 1962. At the next she was balanced precariously on Roland's shoulders, her muscular thighs gripping the

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sides of his neck, his palms over his head and pressing into the small of her back as he sprinted back the way they had come, his old sprung boots slapping the needle-strewn earth between the ruts left by her wheelchair.

"Odetta!" he cried, reverting in this moment of stress to the name by which he had first known her. "Don't lose the gun! For your father's sake, *don't lose the gun!*"

They were racing between the trees. Shadow lace and bright blots of sun dapple ran across them in moving mosaics as Roland lengthened his stride. They were going downhill now. Susannah raised her left hand to ward off a branch that might have brought blood from the side of her face or even slapped her from the gunslinger's shoulders. At the same moment, she dropped her right hand to the butt of the gunslinger's ancient, heavy revolver, cradling it.

A mile, she thought. *How long to run a mile! How long with him going flat out like this! Not long, if he can keep his feet on these slippery needles . . . but maybe too long. Let him be all right. Lord — let Eddie be all right.*

As if in answer, she heard the unseen beast loose its cry again. That vast cry was like thunder. Like doom.

2.

HE WAS the largest creature in the forest — which had once been known as the Great West Woods — and the oldest. Many of the huge old elms that Roland noticed in the valley below had been little more than twigs sprouting from the ground when the bear came out of the dim unknown reaches of End-World like a brutal, wandering king.

Once, the Old People had lived in the West Woods (it was their leavings that Roland had found from time to time during the last weeks), and they had gone in fear of the colossal, undying bear. They had tried to kill him when they first discovered they were not alone in the new territory to which they had come, but although their arrows enraged him, they seemed to do him no serious damage at all. And he was not confused about the source of his torment, as were other beasts of the forest — even the predatory bushcats that denned in the thinner woods and underbrush to the west. No; he knew, this bear. *Knew.* His knowing was as unnatural as his size. And for every arrow that found its mark in the flesh below his

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The bear made his way through the forest like a moving building.

shaggy pelt, he took three, four, perhaps as many as half a dozen of the Old People. Children if he could get them; women if he could not. Their warriors he disdained, and this was the final humiliation.

Eventually, as his real nature became clear to them, their efforts to kill him ceased. He was, of course, a demon incarnate — or the shadow of a god. They called him Mir, which to these people meant "the world below the world." He stood seventy feet high, and after centuries of undisputed rule in the West Woods, he was dying. Perhaps the instrument of his death had at first been a microscopic organism in something he had eaten or drunk; perhaps it was old age; more likely a combination of both. The cause did not matter. The truth was that a rapidly multiplying colony of parasites was foraging within the fortified walls that enclosed his fabulous brain, and he had run mad.

The bear had known men were in his woods again; he ruled these tracts of forest, and although they were vast, nothing of importance that happened within them escaped his attention for long. He had drawn away from the newcomers, not because he was afraid, but because he had no business with them, nor they with him. Then the parasites had begun their work, and as his madness increased, he became sure that the Old People had returned, the ones who had set traps for him and had once even attempted to burn the woods around him before realizing he was greater than they . . . greater in age, in strength, in guile. He came to believe, as he lay in his final den some thirty miles from this place, that the Old People had finally found a stratagem that worked: in a word, poison.

He came this time not to take revenge for some petty wound, but to stamp them out entirely before their poison could finish its work with him . . . and along the way, all thought ceased. What was left was red rage, the shrieking, rusty buzz of the thing on top of his head — the turning thing between his ears that had once done its work in smooth silence — and an eerily enhanced sense of smell that led him unerringly toward the camp of the three pilgrims.

The bear, whose real name was not Mir but something else entirely, made his way through the forest like a moving building, a shaggy tower

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with reddish brown eyes. Those eyes glowed with both fever and madness. His huge head, now wearing a garland of broken branches and fir needles, swung ceaselessly from side to side. Every now and then, he would sneeze in a muffled explosion of sound — *AH-CHOW!* — and clouds of squirming white parasites would discharge from his dripping nostrils. His paws, armed with curved talons three feet in length, tore at the trees. He walked upright, sinking deep tracks in the soft black soil beneath the trees. He reeked of fresh balsam and old, diseased feces.

The thing on top of his head whirred and squealed, squealed and whirred.

The course of the bear remained almost constant: a straight line that would lead him to the camp of those who had dared return to his forest, who had dared to fill his head with dark green agony. Old People or New People, they would die. When he came to a dead tree, he sometimes left the straight path long enough to push it down. The dry, explosive roar of its fall pleased him; when the tree had finally collapsed its rotten length on the forest floor or come to rest against one of its mates, the bear would push on through slanting bars of sun turned misty with floating motes of sawdust.

3.

TWO DAYS before, Eddie Dean had begun carving again — the first time he had attempted to carve anything since the age of twelve. He remembered that he had enjoyed doing it, and he believed he must have been good at it, as well. He couldn't remember that part, not for sure, but there was at least one clear indication that it was so: Henry, his older brother, had hated to see him doing it.

Oh, lookit the sissy, Henry would say. *Whatcha makin' today, sissy? A dollhouse? A bedpan for your itty-bitty teeny peenie? Ohhh . . . ain't that CUTE!*

Henry would never come right out and tell Eddie not to do something; would never just walk up to him and say, *Would you mind quitting that, bro? See, it's pretty good, and when you do something that's pretty good, it makes me nervous. Because, you see,* I'm *the one that's supposed to be pretty good at stuff around here.* Me. *Henry Dean. So what I think I'll do, brother of mine, is just sort of rag on you. I won't come right out and say,*

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"Don't do that; it's making me nervous," because that might make me sound, you know, a little fucked-up in the head. But I can rag on you, because that's part of what big brothers do, *right! All part of the image. I'll rag on you and tease you and make fun of you until you just . . . fucking . . . QUIT IT! O.K.!*

Well, it *wasn't* O.K., not by a long shot, but in the Dean household, things usually went the way Henry wanted them to go. And until very recently, that had seemed right — not O.K., but *right.* There was a small but crucial difference there, if you could but dig it. There were two reasons why it seemed right. One was an on-top reason; the other was an underneath reason.

The on-top reason was because Henry had to Watch Out for Eddie when Mrs. Dean was at work. He had to Watch Out all the time. Once, there had been a Dean *sister;* she would have been exactly four years older than Eddie and four years younger than Henry if she had lived, but that was the key clause, *if she had lived.* She had been run over by a car piloted by a drunk driver when Eddie was two. She had been watching a game of hopscotch on the sidewalk when it happened.

As a kid, Eddie had sometimes thought of his sister while listening to Mel Allen doing the play-by-play on The Yankee Baseball Network. Someone would really pound the ball, and Mel would bellow, *"Holy cow, he got all of that one! SEEYA LATER!"* Well, the drunk had gotten all of Gloria Dean, holy cow, seeya later. Gloria was now in that great upper deck in the sky, and it had not happened because she was unlucky, or because the state of New York had decided not to jerk the jerk's licence after his third OUI, or even because God had bent down to pick up a peanut shell; it had happened (as Mrs. Dean frequently told her sons) because there had been no one around to Watch Out for Gloria.

Henry's job was to make sure nothing like that ever happened to Eddie. That was his job, and he did it, but it wasn't easy. Henry and Mrs. Dean agreed on that, if nothing else. Both of them frequently reminded Eddie of just how much Henry had sacrificed to keep Eddie safe from drunk drivers and muggers and junkies and any possible malevolent aliens who might be cruising around up there in the general vicinity of the upper deck, aliens who might decide to come down from their UFOs on jet sleds at any time in order to kidnap little kids like Edward Alan Dean. So it was wrong to make Henry nervous. If Eddie was doing something that made Henry

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feel that way, he ought to cease and desist immediately. Sacrificing those things was a way of paying Henry back for all the time Henry had spent Watching Out for Eddie.

Then there was the underneath reason. That reason (the world beneath the world, one might say) was more powerful, because it could never be stated: Eddie could not allow himself to be better than Henry at much of anything, because Henry was, for the most part, good for nothing . . . except Watching Out for Eddie, of course.

Henry taught Eddie how to play basketball in the playground around the block from the apartment building where they lived — this was in Brooklyn, where the towers of Manhattan stood against the horizon like a dream, and the welfare check was king. And although Eddie was eight years younger than Henry, and much smaller, he was also much faster. He had a natural feel for the game; once he got on the cracked, hilly concrete of the court with the ball in his hands, the moves seemed to sizzle in his nerve endings. He was *better* than Henry. If he had not known that from the results of the pickup games in which they sometimes played, he would have known it from Henry's thunderous looks and the hard punches to the upper arm Henry dealt out on their way home afterward. These punches were supposedly Henry's little jokes — "Two for flinching!" Henry would cry cheerily, and then *whap! whap!* into Eddie's bicep with one knuckle extended — but they did not *feel* like jokes. They felt like warnings. They felt like Henry's way of saying, *You better not fake me out and make me look stupid when you drive for the basket, bro; you better remember that I'm Watching Out for You.*

The same was true with reading . . . and baseball . . . and Ring-a-Levio . . . and math . . . even jump rope, which was a girl's game. That he was better than Henry at all these things, or *could* be better, was a secret that had to be kept at all costs. Because Eddie was the younger brother. Because Henry was Watching Out for him. But the most important part of the underneath reason was also the simplest: these things had to be kept secret because Henry was Eddie's big brother, and Eddie adored him.

4.

Two days ago, while Susannah was skinning out a rabbit and Roland was starting supper, Eddie had been in the forest just south of camp.

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He had seen a funny spur of wood jutting out of a fresh stump. A weird feeling — he supposed it was the one people called déjà vu, although Eddie wasn't sure just what that meant — swept over him, and he found himself staring fixedly at the spur, which looked like a badly shaped doorknob. He was distantly aware that his mouth had gone dry.

After several seconds he realized he was *looking* at the spur sticking out of the stump, but *thinking* about the courtyard behind the building where he and Henry had lived — thinking about the feel of the warm concrete under his ass, and the whopping smells of garbage from the dumpster around the corner in the alley. In this memory he had a chunk of wood in his left hand, and a paring knife from the drawer by the sink in his right. The chunk of wood jutting from the stump had called up the memory of that brief period when he had fallen violently in love with wood carving. It was just that the memory was buried so deep he hadn't realized, at first, what it was.

What he had loved most about carving was the *seeing* part, the part that happened even before you began. Sometimes you saw a toy sled or wagon. Sometimes a dog or cat. Once, he remembered, it had been the face of an idol — one of the spooky Easter Island monoliths he had first seen in an issue of *National Geographic* at school. That had turned out to be a good one. The game was to find out how much of that thing you could get out of the wood without breaking it. You could never get it all, but if you were careful, you could sometimes get quite a lot.

There was something inside the misshapen boss on the side of the stump. He thought he might be able to release quite a lot of it with Roland's knife — it was the sharpest, handiest tool he had ever used.

Something inside the wood, waiting patiently for someone — someone like him! — to come along and let it out. To set it free.

Oh, lookit the sissy! Whatcha makin' today, sissy? A dollhouse? A bedpan for your itty-bitty teeny peenie? A slingshot, so you can pretend to hunt rabbits, just like the big boys? Awwww . . . ain't that CUTE?

He felt a burst of hot shame, a sense of wrongness; that strong sense of secrets that must be kept, kept *at any cost*, and then he remembered — again — that Henry Dean, who had in his later years become the great sage and eminent junkie, was dead. This realization had still not lost its power to surprise; it kept hitting him in different ways, sometimes with sorrow, sometimes with guilt, sometimes with anger. On this day, two

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days before the great bear came charging down on him from the green darkness of the woods, it had hit him in the most surprising way of all. He had felt relief, and a soaring joy.

He was free.

Eddie had borrowed Roland's knife. He used it to cut carefully around the jutting boss of wood, then brought it back and sat beneath a tree with it, turning it this way and that. He was not looking *at* it; he was looking *into* it.

Susannah had finally finished with her rabbit. The meat went into the pot over the fire; the skin she stretched between two sticks, tying it with hanks of rawhide from Roland's purse. Later on, after the evening meal was eaten, Eddie would begin scraping it clean. She used her hands and arms, slipping effortlessly over to where Eddie was sitting with his back propped against the tall old pine. At the campfire, Roland was crumbling some arcane — and no doubt delicious — woods herb in the pot. "What's doing, Eddie?"

His gaze jerked up to her. He had found himself restraining an utterly absurd urge to hide the boss of wood — the wood with the slingshot buried inside it — behind his back. "Nothing," he said, too quickly. "Thought I might, you know, carve something." He paused, then added: "I'm not very good, though." He sounded as if he were trying to reassure her of this fact.

She had looked at him, puzzled. For a moment she seemed on the verge of saying something, and then she simply shrugged and left him alone. She had no idea why Eddie was ashamed to be passing a little time whittling — her father had done it all the time — but if it was something that needed to be talked about, she supposed Eddie would get to it in his own time.

He knew the guilty feelings were stupid and pointless, but he also knew he felt more comfortable doing this work when Roland and Susannah were out of camp. Old habits, it seemed, sometimes died hard. Beating heroin was child's play compared to beating your childhood.

But when they were away, hunting or shooting or keeping Roland's peculiar form of school, Eddie found himself able to turn to his piece of wood with surprising skill and increasing pleasure. The shape was in there, all right; he had been right about that. It was a simple shape, and Roland's knife was setting it free with an eerie ease. He thought he was

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going to get almost all of it, and when he did, he would have a weapon he had made himself. The idea pleased him very much.

When the first tree fell in the forest, still better than fifteen miles away, and the first crows rose in the air, cawing affrightedly, he did not hear. He was already thinking — hoping — that he might see a tree with a bow trapped in it before too long.

5.

HE HEARD the bear approaching before Roland and Susannah did, but not much before — he was lost in that high daze of concentration that accompanies the creative impulse at its sweetest and most powerful. He had suppressed these impulses for most of his life, and now this one held him wholly in its grip. Eddie was a willing prisoner.

He was pulled from this daze not by the sound of falling trees, but by the rapid thunder of a .45 from the south. He looked up, smiling, and brushed hair from his forehead with a sawdusty hand. In that moment, sitting with his back against the tall pine in the clearing that had become home, his face crisscrossed with opposing beams of green-gold forest light, he looked handsome indeed — a young man with unruly dark hair that constantly tried to spill across his high forehead, a young man with a strong, mobile mouth and hazel eyes.

For a moment his eyes shifted to Roland's other gun, hanging by its belt from a nearby branch, and he found himself wondering how long it had been since Roland had gone anywhere without at least one of his fabulous weapons hanging by his side. That question led to two others.

How old *was* he, this man who had plucked Eddie and Susannah from their world and their *whens*?

And, more important, what was wrong with him?

Susannah had promised to broach that subject, if she shot well and didn't get Roland's back hair up. Eddie doubted very much if Roland would tell her — not at first — but it was time to let Old Long, Tall, and Ugly know that *they* knew *something* was wrong.

"There'll be water if God wills it," Eddie said, and turned back to his carving, smiling as he did so. They had both begun to pick up Roland's little sayings . . . and he theirs. It was almost as if they were halves of the same —

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Then a tree fell in the forest, this one *much* closer, and Eddie was on his feet in a second, the half-carved slingshot in one hand, Roland's knife in the other. He stared across the clearing, heart thumping, all his senses finally alert.

Something was coming. Now he could hear it, trampling its heedless way through the underbrush, and he marveled bitterly that this realization had come so late. Far back in his mind, a small voice told him this was what he got. This was what he got for doing something better than Henry, for making Henry nervous.

Another tree fell in a ratcheting, coughing series of explosions. Looking down a ragged aisle between the tall firs, Eddie saw a cloud of sawdust rise in the still air. The creature responsible for that cloud suddenly bellowed — a raging, gut-freezing sound.

Whatever it was, it was *huge.*

He dropped the chunk of wood, then flipped Roland's knife at a tree fifteen feet to his left. It somersaulted twice in the air and then stuck halfway to the hilt in the wood, quivering. He grabbed Roland's .45 from the place where it hung, and cocked it.

Stand or run?

But he no longer had the luxury of that question. The thing was *fast* as well as huge, and it was now too late to run. A gigantic shape began to disclose itself in the woods to the north of the clearing, a shape that towered above all but the tallest trees. It was lumbering directly toward him . . . and now it gave voice to another of those cries.

"Fuck *me,*" Eddie whispered as another tree bent, cracked like a howitzer, and then crashed to the forest floor in a cloud of dust and dead needles. Now he could see it, lumbering straight toward the clearing where he stood. It was a bear the size of King Kong. Its footfalls made the ground shuddder beneath Eddie's feet.

What will you do, Eddie? Roland suddenly asked. *Think, for your father's sake — it is the only advantage you have. What will you do?*

It was not just out for a stroll — Eddie was sure of that. It was coming for *him.* He could stand here and shoot at it. It would be impossible to miss. But could he kill it?

Maybe with a bazooka.

It suddenly occurred to him that there was a third choice. He could climb.

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He turned and looked at the tree against which he had been leaning. It was a huge, hoary pine, easily the tallest tree in this part of the woods. The first branch spread out over the forest floor in a feathery green fan about seven feet up. Eddie dropped the revolver's hammer and then jammed the gun into the waistband of his pants. He leaped for the branch and did a frantic chin-up. Behind him, branches popped and snapped; leaves whirred wildly, as if in a hurricane. The bear gave voice to another bellow as it burst into the clearing.

It would have had him just the same, would have left his guts hanging in gaudy strings from the lowest branches of the pine, if another of those sneezing fits had not come on it at that moment. It kicked the ashy remains of the campfire into a black cloud, and then stood almost doubled over, huge front paws on its huge thighs, looking for a moment like an old man with a cold. It sneezed again and again — *AH-CHOW! AH-CHOW! AH-CHOW!* — and clouds of parasites blew out of its muzzle. Hot urine flowed in a stream between its legs and hissed out the campfire's scattered embers.

Eddie went up the tree like a monkey on a stick, not bothering to check for handholds. He paused only once, and that was to make sure the gunslinger's revolver was still seated firmly in the waistband of his pants. He was in terror, already half-convinced that he was going to die (yes, of course, without Henry to Watch Out for You, what else can you expect? the voice of MOTHER demanded), but a crazy laughter raved and bucketed through his head just the same. *Been treed,* he thought. *How 'bout that, sports fans! Been treed by Bearzilla.*

The creature raised its head again — the thing turning between its ears caught winks and flashes of sunlight as it did so — then spotted Eddie and charged the tree. It reached up with one paw and slashed forward, meaning to knock Eddie loose like a pinecone. The paw tore through the branch on which Eddie was standing just as he lunged up for the next. It tore through one of his shoes as well, pulling it from his foot and sending it flying in two ragged pieces.

That's O.K., Eddie thought. *Goddamn things were worn out, anyway.*

The bear roared and lashed at the tree, cutting deep wounds in its ancient bark, wounds that bled clear, resinous sap. Eddie kept on yanking himself up. The branches were getting thinner now, and when he risked a glance down, he stared directly into the bear's muddy eyes. Below its

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cocked head, the clearing had become a target. The scattered smudge of campfire was the bull's-eye at its center.

"Missed me, you hairy son of a b—," Eddie began, and then the bear, its head still cocked back to look at him, sneezed. Eddie was immediately drenched in hot snot . . . snot that was filled with thousands of small white worms. They wriggled frantically on his shirt, his forearms, his throat and face.

Eddie screamed in mingled surprise and revulsion. He began to brush at his eyes and mouth, lost his balance, and just managed to hook an arm around the branch beside him in time. He held on and raked at his skin, wiping off as much of the wormy phlegm as he could. The bear roared and batted the tree again. The pine rocked like a mast in a gale . . . but the fresh claw marks that appeared were at least seven feet below the branch on which Eddie's feet were planted.

The worms were dying, he realized — must have begun dying as soon as they left the infected swamps inside the monster's body. It made him feel a little better, and he began to climb again. He stopped twelve feet farther up, daring to go no farther. The trunk of the pine, easily twenty feet in diameter at its base, was now no more than seven feet through the middle. He had distributed his weight on two branches, but he could feel both of them bending springily beneath his weight. He had a crow's nest view of the forest and the foothills to the west now, spread out below him in an undulating carpet. Under other circumstances, it would have been a view to relish.

Top of the world, Ma, he thought. He looked down into the bear's upturned face again, and for a moment all coherent thought was driven from his mind by simple amazement.

There was something growing out of the bear's skull.

It turned jerkily, kicking off flashes of sun as it did so, and Eddie could hear it screaming thinly. He had owned a few old cars in his time — the kind the used-car dealers liked to tag Handyman's Specials — and he thought he recognized that sound. It was the noise bearings made when they were old. When they needed to be replaced before they froze up.

The bear uttered a long, purring growl. Yellowish foam, thick with worms, squeezed between its jaws in curdled gobbets. If he had never looked into the face of utter lunacy (and he supposed he had, having been eyeball-to-eyeball with that world-famous bitch Detta Walker on more

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than one occasion), he was looking into it now . . . but that face was, thankfully, a good thirty feet below him, and at their highest reach, those killing talons were fifteen feet under the soles of his feet. And, unlike the trees upon which the bear had vented its spleen as it approached the clearing, this one was not dead.

"Mexican standoff, honeybuns," Eddie panted. He scraped the heel of one hand across his forehead and flicked the mess down into the bugbear's face.

Then the creature the Old People had called Mir embraced the tree with its great forepaws and began to shake it. Eddie grabbed the trunk and held on for dear life, eyes squeezed into grim slits, as the pine began to sway back and forth like a pendulum.

6.

ROLAND HALTED at the edge of the clearing. Susannah, perched in her own crow's nest, stared unbelievingly across the open space. The creature stood at the base of the tree where Eddie had been when the two of them left the clearing forty-five minutes ago. She could see only its lower body; its upper half was concealed by a quivering screen of branches and dark green needles. Roland's other gun belt lay beside one of the monster's feet. The holster, she saw, was empty.

"My God," she murmured.

The bear screamed and began to shake the tree. The branches lashed as if in a high wind. Her eyes skated rapidly upward, and she saw a dark form near the tree's tip. Eddie. He was hugging the trunk and rolling back and forth with the tree. As she watched, one of his hands slipped and flailed wildly for purchase. The branches he was standing on sagged.

"*What do we do?*" she screamed down at Roland. "It's going to shake him loose! What do we do?"

Roland tried to think about it, but that queer sensation had returned again — it was always with him now, but stress seemed to make it worse. He felt like two men existing inside one skull. Each man had his own set of memories, and when they began to argue, each insisting that *his* memories were the true ones, the gunslinger felt as if he were being ripped in two.

He made a desperate effort to reconcile these two halves, and succeeded . . . at least for the moment.

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"It's one of the Twelve!" he shouted. "One of the Guardians! *Must* be! But I thought they were—"

The rest was lost as the bear bellowed up at Eddie again. Now it began to slap at the tree like a punchy fighter. Branches snapped and fell around its feet in a tangle.

"*What?*" Susannah screamed. "*What?*"

Roland closed his eyes for a moment. Inside his head a voice shouted, *The boy's name was Jake!* Another voice shouted back, *There WAS no boy! There WAS no boy, and you know it!*

Get away, both of you! he snarled, and then called out aloud: "Shoot it! Shoot it in the ass, Susannah! It'll turn! Charge! When it does, look for something on its head! It—"

The bear squalled again. It gave up slapping and went back to shaking the tree. Ominous popping, grinding sounds were now coming from the upper part of the trunk.

When he could be heard again, Roland shouted: "I think it looks like a hat! A little steel hat! Shoot it, Susannah! And don't miss!"

Terror suddenly filled her — terror and another emotion, one she would never have expected. It was crushing loneliness.

"*No!*" she screamed back down at him. "*I'll miss! You do it, Roland!*" She began to fumble his revolver out of the belt she wore across her bosom, meaning to give it to him.

"Can't!" Roland shouted up. "The angle's bad! *You* have to do it, Susannah! Do it now! This is the real test, and you'd better pass it!"

"*Roland—*"

"*Do it now, before it can snap the tree off!*" he roared at her. "*Can't you see that's what it's meaning to do?*"

She looked at the revolver in her hand. Looked across the clearing, at the lower half of the gigantic bear. Looked at Eddie, swaying back and forth like a metronome. Eddie might have Roland's other gun; he might not. Even if he did, she saw no way he could use it without being shaken from his perch like an overripe plum.

She raised the revolver. Her stomach was thick with dread. "Hold me still, Roland," she said. "If you don't—"

"Don't worry about me!"

She fired twice, squeezing the shots as Roland had taught her. The heavy reports cut across the sound of the bear shaking the tree like the

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cracks of a bullwhip. She saw both bullets strike home in the left cheek of the bear's rump, less than two inches apart.

It shrieked out surprise, pain, and outrage. One of its huge front paws came out of the dense screen of branches and needles and slapped itself over the hurt place. The hand came away dripping scarlet and rose back out of sight. Susannah could imagine it up there, examining the blood in lunatic wonder. Then there was a rushing, rustling, snapping sound as the bear turned, bending down at the same time, dropping on all fours in order to muster all its speed. For the first time, she saw its face, and her heart quailed. Its muzzle was lathered with foam; its huge eyes glared like lamps. Its shaggy head swung to the left . . . back to the right . . . and centered upon Roland, who stood with his legs apart and Susannah Dean balanced on his shoulders.

With a shattering roar, the bear charged.

7.

NOW SAY your lesson, Susannah Dean, and be true.

The bear came at them in a kind of rumbling lope; it was like watching a runaway factory machine over which someone had thrown a huge, moth-eaten rug.

It looks like a hat! A little steel hat!

She saw it . . . but it did not look at all like a hat to her. It looked like a radar dish — a much smaller version of the kind you sometimes saw in newsreel stories about how the DEW line was keeping everyone safe from a Russian sneak attack. It was bigger than the pebbles she had shot off the boulder earlier, but the distance was greater. Sun and shadow ran across it in deceiving dapples.

I do not aim with my hand; she who aims with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

I can't do it!

I do not shoot with my hand; she who shoots with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

I'll miss! I know I'll miss!

I do not kill with my gun; she who kills with her gun —

"Shoot it!' Roland roared. "For the sake of your father, Susannah, *shoot it!*"

With the trigger as yet unpulled, she saw the bullet go home, guided

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from muzzle to target by nothing more nor less than her heart's fierce desire that it should fly true. All fear fell away. What was left was a feeling of deep coldness, and she had time to think: *This is what* he *feels. My God — how does he stand it?*

"I will kill with my heart, you motherfucker," she said, and the gunslinger's revolver roared in her hand.

8.

THE SILVERY thing spun on a steel rod planted in the bear's skull. Susannah's bullet struck it dead center, and the radar dish blew into a hundred glittering fragments. The pole itself was suddenly engulfed in a burst of crackling blue fire that reached out in a net and seemed to grasp the sides of the bear's face for a moment.

It rose on its rear legs with a whistling howl of agony, its front paws boxing wildly and aimlessly at the air. It turned in a wide, staggering circle and now began to flap its arms, as if it had decided to fly away. It tried to roar again, but what came out was a weird warbling sound like an air-raid siren.

"It is good," Roland said. He sounded exhausted. "For a second I thought you were going to freeze, but . . . good. A good shot, fair and true."

"Should I shoot it again?" she asked uncertainly. The bear was still blundering around in its mad circle, but now its body had begun to tilt sideward and inward. It struck a small tree, rebounded, almost fell over, and then began to circle again.

"No need," Roland said. She felt his hands grip her waist and lift her. A moment later she was sitting on the ground with her thighs folded beneath her. Eddie was slowly and shakily descending the pine, but she didn't see him. She could not take her eyes from the bear.

She had seen the whales at the Seaquarium near Mystic, Connecticut, and believe they had been bigger than this — much bigger, probably — but this was certainly the largest land creature she had ever seen in her life. She found herself doubting her own eyes even as she looked at it. And it was clearly dying. Its roars had now become liquid bubbling sounds, and although its eyes were open, it seemed blind. It staggered aimlessly about the camp, knocking over a rack of curing hides, stamping flat the little shelter she shared with Eddie, caroming off trees. She could see the steel

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post rising from its head. The blue fire was gone, but tendrils of smoke were rising around it, as if her shot had ignited its brain.

Eddie reached the lowest branch of the tree that had saved his life, and sat shakily astride it. "Mother Mary and all the saints," he said. "I'm looking right at it, and I still don't beli—"

The bear blundered back toward him. Eddie leaped nimbly from the tree and streaked toward Susannah and Roland. The bear took no notice; it staggered onward, struck the tree, tried to grasp it, failed, and sank slowly to its knees. It remained there for a moment, and now they could hear other sounds from within it. Those sounds made Eddie think of some huge truck engine stripping its gears.

A spasm convulsed it, bowed its back. Its front claws rose and gored madly at its own face. Worm-infested blood flew and splattered. Then it fell over, making the ground tremble with its fall, and lay still.

After all its strange centuries, the bear the Old People had called Mir — the world beneath the world — was dead.

9.

EDDIE PICKED Susannah up, held her with his sap-sticky hands locked against the small of her back, and kissed her deeply. He reeked of sweat and pine tar. She touched his cheeks, his neck; she ran her hands through his wet hair. She felt an insane urge to touch him everywhere until she was sure, absolutely sure, of his reality.

"It almost had me," he said. "It was like being on some crazy carnival ride. What a shot! Jesus, Suze — what a shot!"

"I hope I never have to do anything like that again," she said . . . but a small voice at the center of her demurred. That voice suggested that she could not *wait* to do something like that again. And it was cold, that voice. Cold.

"What was —," he began, turning toward Roland, but Roland was no longer standing there. He was walking slowly toward the bear, which now lay on the ground with its shaggy knees up. From within it came a series of muffled gasps and gurgles as its strange guts continued to run slowly down.

Roland saw his knife planted deep in a tree near the scarred veteran that had saved Eddie's life. He pulled it free and wipe it clean on the

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soft deerskin shirt that had replaced the tatters he had been wearing when the three of them had left the beach. He stood by the bear, looking down at it with an expression of pity and wonder.

Hello stranger, he thought. *Hello, old friend. I never believed in you, not really. Cuthbert did, and I believe Alain did, too, but I was the hardheaded one. I thought you were only a tale for children . . . another wind that blew around in my old nurse's hollow head and finally escaped her jabbering mouth. But you were here all the time, weren't you! Here you were — another refugee of the old times, like the pump at the way station and the old machines under the mountains. Are the Slow Mutants who worshipped those broken remnants the final descendants of the people who once lived in this forest and finally fled your wrath! I don't know, will never know . . . but it feels right. Yes. And then I came with my friends — my deadly new friends, who are becoming so much like my deadly old friends. We came, weaving our magic circle around us and around everything we touch, strand by poisonous strand, and now here you lie, at our feet. The world has moved on again, and this time, after all your years, it has left you behind.*

The monster's body still radiated a deep, sickening heat. Parasites were leaving the thing's mouth and tattered nostrils in hordes, but they died almost at once. Waxy-white piles of them were growing on either side of the bear's head.

Eddie approached slowly. He had shifted Susannah over to one hip, carrying her as a mother might carry a baby. "What was it, Roland? Do you know?"

"He called it a Guardian, I think," Susannah said.

"Yes," Roland said. "I thought they were all gone, *must* all be gone . . . if they ever existed outside of the old wives' tales in the first place." His voice was slow and thoughtful with amazement.

"Whatever it was, it was one crazy mother," Eddie said.

Roland looked at him with an expression of mingled contempt and weariness. "If you'd lived two or three thousand years, you might be crazy, too."

"Two or three thousand . . . Roland, no bear lives two or three thousand years."

Susannah said, "*Is* it a bear? And what's that?" She was pointing at what appeared to be a square metal tag set high on one of the bear's thick rear

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legs. It was almost overgrown with tough tangles of hair, but the afternoon sun had pricked out a single starpoint of light on its stainless-steel surface, revealing it.

Eddie knelt and reached hesitantly toward the tag, aware that strange muffled clicks and clacks were still coming from deep inside the fallen giant. He looked at Roland.

"Go ahead," the gunslinger told him. "It's finished."

Eddie pushed a clump of hair aside and leaned closer. Words had been stamped into the metal. They were quite badly eroded, but he found that, with a little effort, he could read them.

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"Holy Jesus, this thing is a *robot*," Eddie said softly.

Coming Soon

Next month: Three extraordinary novelets: "When Jesus Came to the Moon for Christmas" by David Redd; "Buffalo" by John Kessel, and "The Beastbreaker" by Ray Aldridge.

Increases in postage and other expenses will force a price increase early in 1991; this is an excellent time to enter or extend your subscription or to send a gift. See the special rates on page 161.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Golden Fleece, Robert J. Sawyer (Warner/ Questar, paper 250pp, $4.95)

THE COLONY ship *Argo* is completely controlled by a computer named Jason, who is a good deal smarter than he needs to be. In fact, he has so much spare time that he has found a hobby — trying to decode the binary message received from aliens only three months before the *Argo* took flight. After all, he was taking his ship and his people out into space; it was important to know who else was out there. So important, in fact, that the artificial-intelligence computers that first detected the message decided to keep its existence a secret from human beings until *after* the *Argo* left — so that the scientists aboard the ship wouldn't be tempted to stay home and work on the message from space.

Now, though, Jason has started killing. Not randomly, though; he kills only those who are coming too close to finding out a secret that he is determined to keep. *Golden Fleece* centers around the efforts of an engineer named Aaron to solve the mystery of the death of Diana, the ex-wife whose contract he recently neglected to renew. Jason has all the advantages. Not only does he control all the ship's systems, but also he has complete access to the neural-net simulations of all the crew. That means he knows every painful little memory in Aaron's mind. He knows how his opponent thinks. Aaron doesn't have much of a chance to solve the mystery; and if he *does* solve it, he has even less chance of going on living.

What Sawyer sets up in the *Golden Fleece* is a damn good science fiction mystery. What he delivers is much more. Yes, the mystery is resolved to our perfect satisfaction. But more important, Sawyer gives us something far more rare in this age of the quotidian hero: a genuine tragedy. It is no accident that he invokes Greek myth in the title of the book. Sawyer is willing to play on the same field as Aeschylus and Euripides, and he proves himself equal to the task. Jason is, in my opinion, the deepest computer character in all of science fiction, which takes nothing away from HAL and MYCROFT. And Aaron is, in my opinion, one of the most well-drawn, fallible, *human* de-

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tectives I've encountered in mystery fiction — in a league with, say, Rendells's Inspector Wexford. And because Sawyer is clearly *not* setting up a detective series, Aaron is able to go through genuine self-discovery and transformation during the course of the novel.

Golden Fleece has, in its 250 pages, more than most novels twice its length: Tragedy. Mystery. Character. Since Sawyer is a long-time writer about hi-tech subjects, it has a completely believable milieu. And can he write? Yes — with near-Asimovian clarity, with energy and drive, with such grace that his writing becomes invisible as the story comes to life in your mind.

This is a book you won't want to miss. It won't be a snob hit — it's too accessible and exciting for the li-fi types to take it to their bosoms. Instead, it's the kind of book that you might as well buy two copies of in the first place — one to read and keep, and one to shove at your friends, saying, "Read this! Now!"

I say you won't want to miss this book, but there's a very good chance that you *will*. This is Sawyer's first novel, after all, and his short fiction has appeared only in *Amazing* (which is *like* being published) and in Canadian publications, so you probably haven't heard of him. Worse yet, *Golden Fleece* is scheduled as a December book from Warner/Questar, and it *isn't* their lead title (the lead is number five in some dragon series). In case you didn't notice, the December time slot is the kiss of death in science fiction — books published then are routinely ignored for awards; there's not even time for the title to float upward on the Nebula recommendations and attract attention that way. Warner isn't giving it much push as a secondary book; the cover is fairly ordinary hi-tech stuff; there's no commercial hype to alert you to the fact that this book is something special; you'll have about a month to pick it up before it gets swept off the shelves to make way for the January books.

All you get is this review — and any other reviews that might come out. But that's our job, isn't it? To find the good ones and tell you about them.

How good is *Golden Fleece*? A friend of mine — an English professor — used to ask, whenever he saw me, "Why are you still writing that spaceship stuff? Now I can answer: Because *this* is possible.

The King, Donald Barthelme (Harper & Row, cloth, 158pp. $16.95)

For many years, Donald Barthelme wrote the most astonishing and viciously funny stories, playing fast and loose with literary figures in American letters. His reality

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games brought much of his work squarely within the realm of science fiction and fantasy, though few of his stories ever attracted much notice within the genre community.

Now Donald Barthelme is dead, but even in death he follows what seems to be a burgeoning science fiction tradition: publication of the posthumous novel. *The King* is, as we might have expected, a slightly insane Arthurian fantasy set during World War II. He handles the idea, not as the average writer in our genre might have handled it — elaborate explanations of how Arthur got to the England of 1939, Arthur's marveling at the techno-wonders of the era, and the obligatory scene of Arthur tilting with Hilter, spear to spear — but rather as Barthelme's readers might have come to expect. There are no explanations. Arthur, Guinevere, Sir Kay, Lancelot, and Mordred all act out their timeless story with the particular setting of World War II almost as an annoyance to them. Arthur regards Winston Churchill with condescending tolerance. And in the meantime, the Red Knight (a Communist) and the Black Knight (a black, of course), provide us with a third layer of reality — the modern, post-Cold War sensibility.

Throughout the story we watch as the Black Knight almost inadvertantly puts together all the pieces of a particularly *un*-holy grail; the atomic bomb. Only once King Arthur has the bomb in his hands — has the power to destroy his enemies so easily, so completely — he shows the difference between the imaginary age of chivalry and our own time. He declines to use it. There are things you don't do, if you're a true knight.

But what is Donald Barthelme saying? Never anything as simple as "No Nukes." Because King Arthur, you'll recall, ends up dead, and all his dreams shattered. For all his reality games, Barthelme's fiction has always dealt with the real world, and in the real world you sometimes have to face the choice between surviving, but only by becoming something a good deal uglier than you ever thought you were, or staying pure and being destroyed yourself. In this marvelous and deceptively light book, Barthelme accomplishes effortlessly what James Morrow, for instance, labors so painfully and fruitfully to do: He makes us laugh at our own pride and at our own shame, without ever seeming to exclude himself from his own bittersweet ridicule.

Loom, Brian Moriarty (Animated computer fantasy, Lucasfilm Games, $49.95)

Viable storytelling forms and genres never *begin* with the artistic elite of an established form. They be-

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gin with the common people, and with the artists who serve them. The commercial artists. The "hacks."

The literati of Shakespeare's day wrote poems; if you wanted prestige you wrote an epic. Plays, however, were for writers who wanted to make a buck. Yet it was there, in the commercial ferment of vulgar, democratic art that Elizabethan dramatists moved from *Gammer Gurton's Needle* to *King Lear* in a generation or two. All the while, however, the literati hardly seemed to notice the change; drama was a second-rate art, a place where one might dabble for money, but never a medium for serious poetry.

The same thing happened with the movies. A mere amusement was first seized upon by social reformers to make cheap, quick anti-capitalist statements; then it was co-opted by the capitalists to promote the status quo. Established writers (and actors, for that matter) thought of "going Hollywood" as slumming, if you did it once; selling out, if you made a career of it. Yet within a generation or two we had films that live in the public imagination as almost no literary works of the period do: *Casablanca, Gone With the Wind, It Happened One Night, It's a Wonderful Life, The Wizard of Oz.* The literati sneered for at least another generation, even as classics were being created under their noses.

Need I point out other cases? Television: We are in its golden age right now, even as the literati curl their lips and utter snide observations. Animation: Disney's vision didn't become reality until *Snow White,* and even now a mere "cartoon" can hardly be taken seriously as art; yet the audience, the Folk, demos, the Great Unwashed have taken the great works of animation to their hearts.

And what about the genre of science fiction, cutting across all the media in which it is presented? We've gone from *Buck Rogers* to *Blade Runner,* from Doc Smith and Edgar Rice Burroughs to Bruce Sterling and Octavia Butler, all in a generation or two.

All this is prelude. I'm here today to announce the coming-of-age of another storytelling medium: The computer game. As with the movies, videogames began as amusements, right down to the coin slot in the arcade machine. As with the movies, computer games were at first the domain of technical aficionados — programmers ruled.

And when programmers ruled, we got a lot of games that were long on programming tricks, but short on storytelling. The designers of the original text and video adventures games pulled out every cliche in the stories they read and loved most: science fiction and fantasy. It's partly

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because of the alternate-world nature of computer storytelling, but mostly because of the techno-nerd (read "sf reader") society in which computer programmers lived that science fiction and fantasy *still* dominate the stories that are told in the bits and bytes of computer games.

And just as the first sci-fi movies represented the most cliche-ridden sort of science fiction, so also do most computer games consist of really cool screen representations of every dumb-as-your-thumb sci-fi and fantasy idea stolen from Bester or Tolkien and beaten into the ground by derivative hacks.

In short, while the games, as games and as programs, might have been great fun, as stories they remained pretty lame . . . until now.

Brian Moriarty isn't Shakespeare (yet), and *Loom* isn't *Lear*. To stretch the analogy, it's more likely that Moriarty is Marlowe, and *Loom* is *Doctor Faustus*. The point is that before this game, there was only hope and pretention to indicate the artistic possibilities of computer games as a storytelling medium. Now that *Loom* exists, computer games have to be taken seriously. We now know that it's possible for a computer game to tell an *original* fantasy story, and to give us images and experiences we could get in no other medium.

Loom is the story of Bobbin, a young boy who grew up as an orphan in the Guild of Weavers. His world has fragmented itself into many guilds, each completely isolated from the others, and within their isolation they have developed their crafts to have great magical power. The weavers' distaff has evolved into a musical instrument, on which spells or "drafts" are cast by plucking strings in simple melodies. More important, the great loom in the center of the Weavers' island holds together the fabric of the universe, and it's beginning to come apart. In fact, Bobbin's birth was the first disturbance that signalled the unraveling of the loom.

The weavers can't mend their own loom; nor do they have the will to destroy it and unlink it from the universe. Instead they transform themselves into swans and fly off into another place, beyond the reach of the Loom, leaving Bobbin as the sole user of Weaver magic in the world. The rest of the story of Loom is his quest, moving from guild to guild, until he confronts Chaos and destroys the Loom.

For those who care about innovation, Moriarty has developed an almost wordless interface with the game. Using a mouse, you simply show the character where to go and then use the distaff to play the drafts that you learn during the game in order to cast spells. In oth-

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er words, the mechanics of game-playing don't get between you and the story; very quickly the whole *process* of playing becomes invisible, intuitive, just as you don't think about paragraphing, kerning, leading, or typefaces while reading a well-designed book. The puzzles are simple and you're helped by the story itself (no clue book is needed), so you experience it as a story, not as an obstacle course. Your character never dies because you made a mistake. And Lucasfilm Games has the best computer animation in the games business, bar none, and it only gets better from game to game.

Most important to me, though, is the fact that Moriarty has told a story that I haven't seen before. Oh, the broad outlines of the story are familiar enough — fantasy is the rawest exposure of myth, and so repetitiveness is inescapable — but there isn't a breath of warmed-over Tolkien in the world of this game. (Nor is there much recycled Disney, the other main source for animated games.) Moriarty has created a different fantasy milieu, a new magic system, and characters with more charm and individuality than I've ever seen in a computer game.

In fact, *Loom* passed its real test. Geoffrey (12 — an experienced computer gamer) and Emily (9 — not a gamer at all) both played the game with ease. And as they played, what pulled them onward was not the desire to win, but rather an eagerness to find out what happens next. In other words, they received the game as a story. Except that unlike any other storytelling medium, they got to be a part of the unfolding of the tale; the course of the story was somewhat different as each of them played.

Dedicated gamers may object to the fact that gameplay is definitely subservient to the story; but you read this magazine because you love stories, and so what's a minus for them will be a plus for you. I'm not saying that you ought to run out and pay $3,000 for a VGA-graphics system with an Ad-Lib sound board, though if you already *have* such a machine I do recommend you buy this game and play it.

One personal note: My name shows up in the credits for *Loom*. Lest you think I'm reviewing my own work — a practice often indulged in but beneath contempt —I must tell you that my name is there only because Moriarty is generous to a fault. My "contribution" consisted of having said, "Hey, that's neat," several times during a screening of the nearly-finished game. In part because of what I saw at that screening, I have since come to work with Lucasfilm Games as a consultant on future animated games, but I don't participate in

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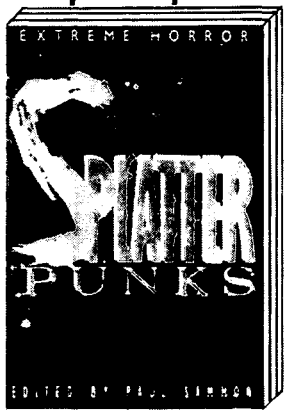

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their profits. Let my current involvement with Lucasfilm stand as proof that I mean what I say: The storytelling potential of computer games is so strong that I'm willing to invest a great deal of my time in working in this new form.

With *Loom*, computer gaming does not become "as good as" fiction. They each offer different experiences that can't be directly compared. Memory limitations decree that a book's worth of story still can't be told through an animated game. Rather, *Loom* proves that some stories can be told *better* through the computer game than is possible through any other medium. Give us a generation, and we may well be rich with classics. But as *Pamela* and *Crusoe* and *Tom Jones* were to the novel, so will *Loom* be to the computer game. And we who love fantasy and science fiction can be glad that Brian Moriarty chose to tell our kind of story through his new medium.

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In which an achaeologist from New York comes to a wintry English village in search of some insight into the minds of a distant people and finds it in an unexpected and shocking place . . .

Vindolanda in Winter

By S. Newman

THERE WAS A fine, biting drizzle that congealed to ice on the narrow B road that paralleled Hadrian's Wall. The countryside wavered through the car window as the wipers struggled to keep it clear. On my right the ancient line of stones rose and fell. Coming from New York, where nothing old can stay, it had amazed me that so much could be left of something constructed seventeen hundred years ago. But now, looking at the empty lands to the north and south, I wondered why there wasn't more. I had no trouble imagining the mental state of the Roman soldiers who had manned the Wall.

When I told my wife that I'd gotten a grant for six weeks' research to study Roman artifacts found at Hadrian's Wall, she wasn't impressed.

"The north of England in January? You getting masochistic? Can't you just ask for pictures of all that old stuff?" Ellen straightened the pile of books on my desk.

"No, I can't," I said. "I have to examine the pieces myself, hold them in

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my hands. I also want to see exactly where they were excavated, get a feel for the area."

"You'll feel it, all right. Hip-deep in mud and sleet." She shivered at the thought. "Well, thank goodness I have to stay here. Justin and I are doing a suite for that German publisher."

Ellen is a top-notch decorator. When we met, I was the star of the archaeology department, and she a lowly sophomore in interior design. Now she make three times my salary and hobnobs with Manhattan society on a regular basis. I hadn't expected her to be able to come with me, but I'd sort of hoped she'd want to.

I had arranged to stay in the nearby town of Haltwhistle at a B and B ether, they also ran the pub downstairs. It was handy and cheap. I was determined useum guard at Vindolanda. Togto live on the grant money, not Ellen's.

"I've put the electric heater in your room," Lorna Stretford told me. "Seeing that you're American, you'll want the extra warmth. The girl will bring up the linen in a minute. Breakfast's at half past eight. We don't bother getting up much earlier in the dark and what with the pub hours and such. You can eat the pub meal for supper anytime after five."

"That will be fine," I said. "Will it be all right if I just pay for the first week now?"

She leaned back and stared at me as if getting paid for services not yet rendered were something immoral.

"End of each week, I'll give you a reckoning. Pay me then," she answered, and returned to the pub.

The "girl" who brought up the linen was tiny as a child, and fragile. The combined weight of the sheets and towels and her thick, dark hair seemed more than she could support. She edged about the room as far from me as possible, set down her load, and bolted for the door. I began to wonder what kind of stories about visiting American professors they told around here. I held out a fifty-pence piece.

"Thank you, Miss. . . ?" I said.

She recoiled faster than Mrs. Stretford had. Her hair fell back from her face. There was a thin white scar cutting across from her forehead, over the bridge of her nose, down to her chin. It contrasted so with her olive skin that it was the only thing I noticed about her. The head went back down at once.

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"No, thanks," she said in a thick accent. "I do the bed when you eat."

She made her escape, and I put the money back in my pocket. Poor thing must be a refugee from one of the old British colonies, Pakistan or someplace. I wondered how she had got way up here in the cold north.

I went down early to eat the first of many plates of chips, peas, fried fish (shrimp, chicken, gammon, or meat pie) garnished with alfalfa sprouts. Ellen would have touched nothing but the sprouts, but I liked it, and a pint of dark Theakston ale cut the grease nicely. When I came back up, the bed was made, and I threw my jet-lagged body into it gratefully, forgetting all about the girl.

The Vindolanda Trust people had given me a room in Chesterholm House, which also contained the museum and a coffee shop. It was down a pathway from the Roman site, and some days I was caked with mud when I arrived, having done the last fifty feet seated and sliding. It wasn't until my stay was almost over that Morris Stretford asked why I didn't use the staff parking lot on the other side of the building.

"I didn't know there was one," I said. "Why didn't someone tell me?"

"We thought you liked the walk," he told me, shrugging. I wished I had met the last visiting scholar here. He seemed to have conditioned the natives for any oddity.

At any rate, I got to know the area intimately, and maybe the daily squdge through the boggy ruins put me in the right frame of mind for my work. The excavators had marked the exact discovery spot for each artifact on a detailed chart kept in the office, but it helped me to stand at the edge of the dig and look down at the stone floors laid out, still so neatly. With the sleet pouring down my neck, and my ankles covered in mud, I wished the plumbing in the bathhouse still worked. Compared to the water pressure and temperature of the Stretfords' shower, the Roman town had been luxurious. As I went through the horde of combs and earrings and hairpins found in the drains, I allowed myself to fantasize about the exotic women who had lost them as they steamed and gossiped on the fringe of civilization.

In the evenings I often sat in the pub, drinking my pints and listening to the regulars. I rarely contributed to the conversation, but didn't feel ostracized. There was nothing I knew that would interest these people whose conversation dwelt mostly on local happenings and the pernicious-

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ness of the "foreign" government in London. But they threw a comment my way often enough to show I was welcome to join in if I ever had anything of value to contribute. Sometimes I would see the little maid scurrying up the back stairs. Once in a while, I would meet her in the passageway. She always reacted like a trapped rabbit, backing as far from me as she could, and standing frozen until I had passed. From what I could see, she was older than I first thought — thirty, perhaps — and her hands were rough, the knuckles beginning to swell from years of work.

"I don't bite," I laughed once. "See, no fangs."

She must not have understood. She just stared as if a smile were some new preamble to violence.

Finally, after a week or so, I caught Mrs. Stretford on a slow night at the bar, and convinced her to let me buy her a drop of scotch, as the air was so damp. After listening to the story of how she came up from the south. Brighton or someplace, to marry Morris, I asked her about her servant.

"Her name's Phillida," Mrs. Stretford told me as if revealing a dark secret.

"Where's she from?" I asked. "I can't place her accent."

"She was born right here, over by Hexham way, she said."

"Then's she English?" That didn't make sense unless Phillida was both mentally defective and speech-impaired.

"I didn't say that." Mrs. Stretford finished her scotch and automatically washed the glass. "Look, Dr. Peters, you keep your nose in those old bits they dig up, and out of Phillida's business. We take good care of her."

"Are you sure?" I was on my third drink. "She jumps if anyone comes near her, and her arms are scarred worse than her face. Someone's worked her over, more than once."

"That's right." I didn't know a horse-faced lady in horn-rimmed glasses could look so intimidating. "Before we took her in, Phillida got beat nearly every day."

"Her parents?"

"Sold her to a potter. Scars on her arms and legs are burns from the kiln. The one on her face, he carved with a cracked piece still hot; said it was her fault. She had two babies for him, both born dead. Beat her for that, too."

"My God," I said. "Why didn't she go to the police?"

Mrs. Stretford suddenly took my glass, poured out the dregs, and

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refilled it. She kept her eyes on the counter.

"She couldn't. So she came to Morris and me."

"But why . . . ?"

"Closing time," she said suddenly, grabbing my glass again. "We keep the old hours. It's two eggs for breakfast, right? And no bacon?"

I nodded, effectively cut off, and went up to my room.

Just knowing her name, I think, was enough to interest me. Phillida. Spanish, maybe, or Gypsy? That might account for her accent. I had seen tinkers in Ireland, but didn't know if there were any in England. It didn't seem right, though, that the Stretfords should get a cheap servant just because they had saved her from an abusive husband. This was a modern country, with all kinds of social services. She should be able to put the guy in jail, get some vocational training, counseling, that sort of thing. Poor thing probably didn't even know what she was entitled to.

In a crusading spirit, I decided to win her confidence and show her the great world outside Haltwhistle.

FOR ANOTHER week I tried being friendly, talking to Phillida when we passed, offering to carry things for her. It didn't work. The fear in her eyes never wavered. I brought her a bangle once, from the museum gift shop, but she only stared at it nervously. She refused to take it even when I put it in her hand. There was a second of indecision before she dropped it, and I thought I might be getting somewhere. But the next time we met, she scurried past faster than ever.

I was getting more and more discouraged, and not just by Phillida. The weather was worse than Ellen had predicted. The work was going nowhere. Despite being there on the spot where the legions and their followers had lived, all the bits and pieces I was studying seemed remote, unconnected. The leather baby shoe sat lopsided on the table, next to hairpins and broken pots, a ragged edge of cloth, tools for leatherwork and smithing, and one hook-shaped piece of iron that I should have recognized, but I couldn't. I had hoped this would be my chance for a breakthrough, some amazing insight into the minds of those distant people. But it wasn't working out that way. None of the remnants said anything to me. It might have been abstract art made by monkeys. All my years of study seemed useless in the face of this third-century trash, preserved only because it had been thrown away.

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I tried to call Ellen one night, but got only the answering machine. She had said not to bother; she and Justin worked odd hours. I told the machine to let her know I was fine.

I was getting more and more depressed. I growled at work and took my ale up to my room instead of staying in the pub. I even stopped trying to make friends with Phillida. I might have spent my last weeks in England sulking in misanthropic gloom, but then, suddenly, I got sick, really sick. At first it was just a sniffle and cough. That evening I had a medicinal vodka and orange juice instead of my usual pint. That night the cough went from my throat down into my lungs. Two days later I collapsed at the bottom of the path to the museum. Mrs. Mowbray, who manned the gift shop, found me an hour later while walking her spaniel.

They brought me back to the Stretfords' and guided me into bed. I was light-headed, which was all right, because the extra weight was now in my chest. My arms and legs ached like hell, and my throat wouldn't work at all. I thought I'd die, and it seemed like a great idea. Instead I discovered Phillida.

It took fever, chills, and delirium for me to learn what a lifetime in the city and ten years with Ellen had never given me a chance to find out. That the only way to win the confidence of a weak, frightened creature is to be even weaker and more lost than it is. And I was.

I wasn't just body-sick by then; I was heartsick, mind-sick, soul-sick. Sitting alone in that office, faced by pieces of humanity that I couldn't comprehend, I was, for the first time in my life, adrift. In New York, every day was a kind of odyssey, challenging the streets, the subway, the lines, the society. I hadn't realized how well-structured my life was, how little thinking I really had to do. As long as my reaction time was faster than that of the muggers and the mavens, I was fine.

But now I was sick and helpless, and Phillida hovered over me like a raven angel. She sang to me in some language just beyond the range of my knowing. Now and then a word would float by that seemed to have some meaning. I would grasp at it, but the sense was gone. Only Phillida remained.

It was far into the night when I woke, at last aware of the world. Phillida, wrapped in a flannel robe, sat dozing on a chair next to the bed. A tiny oil lamp gave just enough light to show her face, the scar dividing it like a torn photograph. She shivered and pulled the robe closer. Then

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her eyes opened, and she saw me watching her. I started to say something, but the words vanished in the power of her look. My breathing faltered.

I lifted the covers, and she slid under them.

She was cold and so frightened. She flinched at my touch, even when she clung to me. I wanted so much, so much not to hurt her. Her body against mine was like a sparrow's. I could feel her pulse fluttering all through her veins, beating against my skin. Then she kissed me, and after that I don't know if I was gentle or not.

Sometime near dawn I felt her easing out of the bed, careful not to let the cold in again. She fumbled with her clothing, and then I heard the door close behind her.

The next day I felt wonderful. Not even a sniffle. Now, more than ever, I felt I needed to do something for Phillida. She shouldn't have to spend her life skulking about back corridors, doing drudge work for Morris and Lorna Stretford.

Despite my new positive outlook, when I got back to work, the row of artifacts was as unrevealing as ever. A box of unmatched shards of pottery had been added to the accumulation during my illness. They had all been found in a heap against the north wall of section 244d. The museum people hadn't been able to piece them together. I picked one up. It was lumpy, blistered, crumbling a bit at the edges. That was the maker's fault. Obviously, it had broken in the kiln. It was an elementary mistake. Perhaps the potter had let an apprentice try a hand at it. I put it back and glanced through the rest. A few had scratch marks on them that might have had meaning or might have been just another example of ineptitude. For lack of any other inspiration, I decided to take them back with me that night to study in my room.

I laid the pieces out in rows on the far side of my bed. They were all fine specimens of shoddy workmanship. There must be something I could extrapolate from that. I rearranged them, hoping something would click.

There was a soft tap at the door, and Phillida came in. She carried fresh towels and stood hesitantly in the threshold until I held out my arms to her.

Ellen is the kind of woman who knows exactly what she wants in bed and makes sure I do, too. I'd always rather enjoyed that aggressive certainty. But the air of vulnerability about Phillida gave me a sense of authority that was wildly exciting. Maybe it was knowing she was afraid and yet

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trusted me. Or maybe that she saw in me something to fear, that no one else ever had. Those damn enormous dark eyes of hers made me feel omnipotent and sure I could prove it.

Later, with her nuzzled next to me, I happened to glance at the shards.

"Say, Phillida," I said. "Maybe you can tell me about these. Lorna says you—"

Phillida looked over my shoulder, her hair falling across my chest like silk tendrils and setting off interesting sensations. I rolled back and started to reach for her again. Then she saw the shards and froze. Her mouth opened, and she made a noise in the back of her throat like an ancient hinge.

"Phillida, wait!" I cried as she crawled back off the bed and frantically dressed. "I forgot about your husband. I'm sorry. I just thought you might know something about making pots."

But now she was crying, and loudly. I tried to calm her, but I don't think she heard my apologies over her sobs. The door opened, and I dove back under the sheets.

Mrs. Stretford looked at Phillida, the bed, and me. Her eyes narrowed, and I'm amazed the fury in them didn't refract through her glasses and immolate me then. Phillida threw herself against the landlady, then pulled her around the bed and pointed at the pottery.

"You bastard," Lorna hissed at me. "Hasn't she suffered enough?"

She bent over and picked up one of the pieces. Phillida wiped her eyes and stared at it.

"Drunk," she said. "He was drunk, but I made the fire bad. Always me."

Lorna dropped the shard, and Phillida shrank away, her hands over her face.

"I'm sorry," I began again. "I just wanted to show her what I was working on. I thought she might know something about pottery."

Lorna glared at me over Phillida's bent head.

"She knows everything about it, you idiot. Now you get yourself out of here. I won't have you another night under my roof."

"No." Phillida pulled away from her protector and turned back to me. "He understands nothing. He is good."

Good. That embarrassed me. Well-intentioned, maybe, but good wasn't the sort of thing I felt comfortable with. Still, it calmed Lorna down a bit. She shook Phillida gently.

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"He's not good for you, girl," she said. "He'll be haring back to America soon, and then where will you be?"

They seemed to have forgotten that I was there, and I was wishing I weren't. I hadn't really given much thought to what would happen to Phillida after I left. I suppose I had planned to convince her to get into some sort of vocational training program and start a new life. In England, of course. Ellen was pretty broad-minded, but I thought she'd draw the line at Phillida.

Phillida didn't answer, just sat on the bed next to me and took my hand. I patted it in an avuncular sort of way. "I'll see you're all right before I go," I said. Then, to Mrs. Stretford, I added, "You may think you're doing right by having her here, but you're keeping her back. She needs education, skills. I mean, she barely speaks English. Do you expect her to scrub floors for you the rest of her life?"

Lorna stiffened again. "You really don't know anything about it."

"Then tell me!" I shouted. "What's so goddamned weird about Phillida? Why is she holed up here? How come she can't speak the language of the country she was born in?"

"She can!" Lorna lost control. "Some scholar you are; you can't even recognize Latin when you hear it. She comes from the Wall, from back then! I rescued her myself. So there. You can believe it or not!"

With that she stormed out of my room. I looked at Phillida.

"Latin?" I said. "Say something."

"*Amo te*," she whispered.

I steadied myself. This had to be a joke, a put-on by the natives to have a few laughs at the expense of the smart-ass American. Phillida was still looking at me with pathetic adoration.

"What did she mean?" I tried to laugh. "That you're some kind of ghost?"

She didn't understand. She was leaning over the bed, going through the bits of pots. Then she gasped and held up a piece. It was a shallow drinking bowl, or would have been if it had been whole. She showed it to me.

"I put the wet pot on the wall. This one I touch . . . touched. He was not looking. But then, after the oven, he saw. He hit me with it."

I turned the bowl over. I remembered. It had already been noted with some excitement by the cataloger. A thumbprint; a child's, I had thought. It would make a nice footnote to the collection, but really not of much use to my work. Phillida held up her thumb. It fit.

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I swallowed hard. How far would these people go for a hoax? I'd have thought they were incapable of coming up with such a thing. And Phillida's scars were all very real. But it was preposterous even to consider that the story might be true.

"Phillida." I put on my best professorial-adviser attitude. "This really isn't funny, you know, and it won't help you better yourself to go along with it. You should be at a secretarial school or something."

"*Amas me?*" As an artifact specialist, I really hadn't taken much Latin, but the meaning was clear in her eyes. Either she was an actress worthy of the Old Vic, or I was in trouble.

"Well, yeah, sort of. I mean, I'm very fond of you, Phillida. I want you to have a better life," I answered. She stared blankly. Oh hell. I kissed her.

Sometime later I came down to find Lorna Stretford angrily scrubbing the bar counter.

"Shall I settle up with you now?" I asked.

She didn't look up.

"No, you have only another week here anyway, and Phillida wants you to stay."

Then she did look up, and I wished she hadn't. "How could you seduce that poor little thing, after all she's been through?"

There really wasn't any answer to that.

"You don't really think she's from Roman Britain, do you?" I countered.

Lorna sighed and took down the scotch. She poured two glasses almost full and pushed one to me.

"I never thought much about the Wall, even with Morris working at it," she began. "After all, you can hardly walk a mile in England without tripping over an old Roman something. But last summer, when they uncovered the craftsman's street — I don't know; I couldn't keep away from it. I'd bring Morris his lunch and stay an hour watching the digging. Some days I'd almost miss opening time, I'd get that interested, wondering what they'd find next.

"Then one evening — it had been raining for days — the weather suddenly broke, and there was the most glorious sunset. I just had to get out. So I left Morris tending the bar, and came up to Vindolanda. I was standing just at the end of the street, by where they found the pots, with the sun in my eyes, and all at once I had this feeling. I was standing in a room, looking out the window. I was cutting vegetables: cabbage and

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turnips and carrots. There was a scream and a thump from somewhere behind me. And I thought, 'Oh dear Lord, he's beating her again.'"

She gave me a quick glance to see if I was smirking. I wasn't.

"Then there was a whimper, like some poor animal in a leg trap. I couldn't bear it. I turned around and reached out my arms. There was a slap and another scream and . . . Phillida fell, right out of nowhere. Nearly knocked me over. She was swollen and bleeding and covered with dirt. So I took her home, cleaned her up, and kept her with us."

She defied me to call her a liar.

"But didn't you ever wonder how or why she got here?"

Lorna finished her scotch and resumed her polishing. "No. I'm a church-going woman and don't question God's wisdom. She was in need, and I was the nearest help. I intend to see she stays safe. So you finish up your business and go and leave poor Phillida alone."

But I couldn't.

The next morning I was gathering up the shards to take back, when Phillida came in. She knelt beside me, rubbing her head against my arm. Nervously, she fingered the pottery pieces.

"So old now," she breathed.

In the morning twilight, in her dark dress, I could almost believe she came from somewhere else. The shadow of a shadow, a candle flame, would disperse her.

"Phillida," I said softly. "Come with me today."

"Come with you?" She looked up in astonishment.

"No, no," I said quickly. "I mean to work, to the museum. I could show you the place. I think you should see it."

"Vindolanda."

She shrank again, hunched onto the floor.

"Hey," I said, lifting her. "I'll be with you. Nothing can hurt you while I'm there."

She didn't respond at first. Then she put her hand in mine. "*Fideo tibi.*"

I wish she hadn't looked at me like that.

I took her in the car. She closed her eyes the whole way and kept a death grip on the seat belt. By this time I had found the parking lot, so we went through the back door of the museum and straight to my office. I showed her the collection.

"These are just the things from last summer," I told her. "There's a lot

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more in the museum, even a diorama of a Roman kitchen."

Phillida didn't pay attention. She looked at the artifacts a long time, giving the baby shoe a caress, lingering over the coins and jewelry. I picked up the iron hook.

"I know I've seen this before, but I can't remember. If you're really from the past, you'll know what it is. Right?"

I was joking. Really I was.

She took the hook with a puzzled frown. Good. Now I'd got her. We'd forget all this nonsense, and maybe she could get some counseling.

"Why here?" she asked. "*Strigilis* for bath."

Oh shit. She was right. The Roman idea of a loofah sponge. A curved piece of metal to scrape dirt and a layer of skin off the body. I suppose it did seem out of place in an office. Maybe that's why I hadn't recognized it.

"Phillida, this is crazy!" I shouted. "Come with me. Look!"

I took her into the museum, frantic to show her . . . what? I don't know now. I wasn't thinking clearly. I had to prove to both of us that Lorna's story was ridiculous, that she didn't have to stay at the pub, that I could leave knowing I had set her on the road to an independent, fulfilling life.

We rushed by the tablet room with its upper-class messages, past the tools and leather boots and wooden dishes. Out through the gift shop and up the hill to where the fort had been, across the field, past the inn to the Street of the Potter.

"See, Phillida!" I shouted. "There's nothing here. Just stones and dirt. No houses, no oven. You can't have lived here. And it's time for you to get away!"

We hadn't stopped for our coats, and the air was thick with moisture. Clouds rolled across the hills and down the roads, and I couldn't even see the path back to the museum. Phillida was shaking with cold, beads of water netting her hair and running down her face.

"No, please." She tried to pull me away from there, over to the little admissions building where Morris worked. "I don't like it."

"But Phillida darling, you've got to face this, admit it's all a game. You must!"

"I don't understand," she cried. "Please, I don't like. . . ."

She let go of my hand a second, and the fog swirled around her. Then she screamed. It was the most horrible sound I ever heard, like an animal in agony. She reached for me, and I caught hold of her. Then she turned,

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staring in horror at nothing. All at once — and I swear I saw it — a hand, twice the size of mine, came out of the mist and grabbed her. I must have loosened my grip in my astonishment, because she was yanked from my arms. I tried to grab her back, but she slid into the fog and vanished. The last I saw was one fragile hand, clawing at nothing, desperately trying to stay.

Morris found me, still sitting by the kiln, soaked to the skin.

"This'll break Lorna's heart," he said when I had babbled my story. "You'd best get back to the States now."

I stared at him dully, rain dripping across my eyes. "How can I leave? I've got to find Phillida."

He shook his head. "She's gone. Went back to her own place. I told Lorna we couldn't keep her long. It's not in the order of things. One day or another, he would have taken her."

"Not if I hadn't brought her up here."

"No," he said. "Likely not."

But I took his advice, packed, and came home.

THERE WAS a note from Ellen on the refrigerator, dated the week before. She had gone to live with Justin. She didn't think I'd mind. Strange. I'd always assumed he was gay.

My paper on the discoveries at the Street of the Potter at Vindolanda will be in the next issue of the *Archaeological Journal*. The chairman of my department is quite pleased with it and has suggested a book. I told him I would think about it. It would guarantee my tenure, but I don't think I could face the research back at the Wall. I've been going to a career counselor, and have decided to get some additional therapy. Everyone tells me I'm stagnating, that I can't continue this way. But it's taking all of my energy just to stay at this level. Some days any decision is too frightening to make.

Because even sitting here, in my immaculate modern condo, with the sound of New York below me, I still can't quite drown out Phillida's scream. And despite the rationale that she's dead and has been for sixteen hundred years, I can't get over the feeling that, because of me, right now and forever, he's beating her again.

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Paul Di Filippo's last story here was "Little Worker," (December 1989), and he calls "The Boot" kind of a flip side to the earlier story. It is certainly the most inventive and unusual SF/private-eye tale you are likely to read anytime soon.

The Boot

By Paul Di Filippo

I WAS SITTING IN my office, feeling as bored as the caretaker of a New Mexico solar farm on a cloudy day and wishing for a client. After two months of inactivity, I didn't much care what kind. Any client would do. A socket looking for her runaway plug. A gerry wanting a line to the hottest new semi-illegal, demi-sanctioned golden-age dreamscene. (This year the hundredth anniversary of Woodstock made that particular nostalgia-ware top of the bops, especially for the original attendees who still survived.) A ten-year-old hoping to silicone-slide his way through the legal thicket that blocked the path to full franchise. (The NU Parliament had just lowered the age to twelve, but even that envelope was being pushed by the newest tropes.) Even a grieved and angry spouse itching to get the burst on the mate she suspected of weekly sex-change flings with morphs. I had had them all before, at one time or another, and would no doubt get them all again someday. And when I did, I would take their eft and do what they wanted, no questions asked. Someone with finances as pre-

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carious as mine can't afford the same scruples as your average trumps and forbeses. It's an augie-doggie-eat-augie-doggie world, after all.

But right now it looked like I wouldn't have to worry too much about exercising my ethics. Already noon, and the day was shaping up as dull as a debate between the Green and Conservative candidates for governor of Cuba. In other words, an instant replay of the past sixty. Outside my self-cleaning windows (one of the nice features of this new building; but I was starting to wonder how much longer I could afford the rent), sunlight glinted off the Charles River. On the far bank bulked the black silicrobe-built bubble the authorities had hastily erected around MIT five years ago, during the Gray Goo Boo-boo. The hemisphere visible aboveground continued below, forming a completely enclosed sphere. It had gone up in less than twenty-four hours, but it had seemed like as many days. I remember watching, from my front-row seat, along with the rest of the world, as divisions of NU militia, guided by the top cricks and watsons, kept the tendrils and feelers at bay with water cannons pumping enzymatic lysing fluid, until the silicrobes could complete the container. No one knew what, if anything, was now going on inside the shell. There hadn't been time to engineer any sensors in. The dome was still patrolled around the clock, by guards in liftcages. It was just another thing you lived with.

I was thinking about popping open a cheer-beer and rastering some thrid-vid (I had become addicted to daytime game shows, particularly "Your Life's on the Line"), when I heard footsteps in the hall outside my door. I hastily took my feet down off my desk and tried to project the image that I was busier than a four-armed bartender at happy hour.

The footsteps didn't go past my door, as so many had before. Instead, there came a knock.

I checked the security screen, liked what I saw, and said, "Come in." The door unlatched itself and swung open.

She had on a stylish suit in purple and orange. The jacket had asymmetrical lapels trimmed with blue vat-grown mink; on the larger one was pinned an orchidenia that I could smell from six feet away. Her skirt hung down to her ankles on the left side, but revealed her whole right leg. She wore chrome chopines that added four inches to her height. Her black curly hair was piled high, with a blonde curl dangling down over her forehead. She had canary-yellow irises and a small, tight mouth. On one cheek she wore a small love-cicatrix shaped like the astrological symbol for Venus.

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"Please," she said, "could you cover the windows."

"Lady, we're on the fortieth floor—"

"You can't tell what optics are out there. Please, do it."

I shrugged, and spoke. "Shutters."

Sheets of opaque thermoplastic that had been curled up at the top of the windows stiffened down like tongues across the glass, under the impulse of a mild electric current. I boosted the lights.

"Have a seat," I offered. "Can I get you something to drink?"

She sat and crossed right leg over left. I saw the Tattoon of a panther she wore on her upper thigh. Every thirty seconds, it opened its mouth in a silent snarl.

"Yes, thank you. I'll have a Foma Froth, if you've got it."

I kicked the splice sleeping at my feet. "Hamster, wake up. We've got a visitor."

Hamster opened its eyes and blinked. It preened its whiskers and said, "Yes, sir, my help is needed now?"

"Damn right, you dumb trans. Get a cheer-beer for me, and a Foma Froth for the lady."

Hamster got up and adjusted its short tunic. It walked to the small magnetic fridge, got the drinks, served them, then asked, "Will that be all that is needful, sir?"

"Yeah, go back to sleep."

Hamster did just that.

"Cheapest transgenic they make," I apologized.

She waved her hand negligently. "No matter. My name is Geneva Hippenstiel-Imhausen. May I see your licenses?"

I passed my ID card over. Showing topmost was my Massachusetts PI license. She repeatedly flexed the card to reveal my North American Union, EuroComm, IMF, Brazilian, and orbital credentials. She flexed it one final time, and a naked pinup of the thrid-vid star Siouxsie Sexcrime was revealed. I had to admire Geneva's composure. No expression, just a faint reddening of her cicatrix.

She handed the card back. "They seem to reveal everything I need to know about you."

"That puts you a leg up on me," I said, eyeing the leg in question. "Could I ask what you're here for?"

She leaned forward. "I want to put a boot on someone."

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Well. That took me by surprise. I wouldn't have guessed that was what she needed.

"You do do boots, don't you?" she asked, lifting one neatly scribed eyebrow.

"Oh sure, but they're tricky. It'll cost more than my average rates."

"That's no matter. There's much at stake."

I mentally raised my rates by half. "I'll need to know more before I can definitely take the case. Who are you booting, and what does he have that's not his?"

She sighed. "It's my husband. Jurgen von Bulow. He's made off with the latest trope from the company I own. Perhaps you've heard of Hippenstiel-Imhausen? We're a German firm, specializing in bioactives. Our most recent product is still in the experimental stages. It's an explosive new neurotropin. Even to speak of it now is rather risky. That's why I wanted the shutters down. And I assume your office is recently swept. . . ."

I nodded. She continued, rather reluctantly.

"What my husband took is a trope that allows stochastic reasoning, insight into the dynamics of chaos. We were hoping to have it perfected before word of it reached our competitors. But my husband absconded with some doses of a test batch, and plans to use them, I'm certain. He'll ruin our secrecy. And if anyone ever got to him and unwound the codes from his bloodstream — there go our patents."

"Why'd your husband steal from his own company? Doesn't he stand to gain from your eventual profits?"

Geneva looked both disgusted and embarrassed. "My husband married into the company. I control it. He's something of a wastrel, and I've had to keep him on a short leash. Apparently, it was too galling, and he's finally slipped it."

"I don't understand enough about this new trope. How's he going to use it? What makes you so sure he won't just sell it to one of your rivals?"

"No, no, that's not his plan. You see, he loves to gamble. And this trope —"

"You're not claiming it'll let him beat the odds —"

She nodded. "Exactly right. Insight into the underlying patterns of apparently random events."

Mother of mutants, this was big. I redoubled my fees.

"The regular authorities —"

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"Too many leaks. I need a single man."

I stood up then and walked around to her side. I raised a hand to her face. She didn't flinch. I lightly dragged my roughened thumb over her cicatrix. The love-scar was packed with more pleasure 'ceptors and nerve paths than a tenth-generation biochip. When she climaxed, her panther reared up on its hind legs.

After she opened her eyes, I said, "I'll bet you do."

I DON'T TALK to anyone on a personal level much anymore since my wife left me. Mostly it's just hard raps with the perps and the bad numbers and the dirty-harrys and the clients and the street life I encounter in my investigations. And when I don't have a case going, there's just Hamster to talk to.

I still can't say why I bought the little transgenic. It wasn't a deadly model like some guys packed. The most it could do in that line was give you a bite that might get infected in a week or two if you didn't wash regularly. It wasn't particularly smart. Every command had to be phrased with a minimum of ambiguity, or you'd run the risk of a major quench. Like the time I told it to "fill the car up with methane. . . ." It couldn't play any games more complicated than checkers, and it lost every time. And Lord knows it wasn't a playpet. Sterile, technically female, Hamster had as much sex appeal as a cold mackerel. It was essentially shapeless, and its special diet made it smell like wet hay. Not offensive, but hardly sexy. Now, if I had been able to afford a Golden Colt or a Snakehips, that would have been another story. . . .

Still and all, I was used to the splice. It was sort of like a pair of old slippers, or a chair worn to my shape, except that it could 'wave supper and clean the office and nod when I bounced ideas off it.

That's why I was talking to it, now that Geneva had left.

"I guess the first thing we'll have to do is head out to Logan and see if we can pick up von Bulow's trail from there. His flight arrived three days ago, but I've had colder starts."

"Yes, you have, sir. I am certain you have, although I cannot remember exactly when. I am trying to think now. This is hard work, sir; just give me a moment. There was one time — I am sure I will think of it in a minute —"

"Hamster —"

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"Yes, sir?"

"Cut the crap and get me my gun."

I don't pack deadly force. No flashlights or splat-pistols or pellet-throwers for me. In most tense situations, I prefer the cool, calm voice of reason, or flight. If I have to take someone out, I do it temporarily, with a shocker. All you need is an inch of bare skin to deliver a patterned jolt of current that overloads the higher neural functions, such as making the decision to kill a harmless PI.

I slapped the gun Hamster passed me to my hip, where its biopoly barrel mated to the holster-patch on my pants. It would be there when I needed it, coming free at the touch of my hand alone. I opened a desk drawer and took out my boot and a pad of fluorescent-orange adhesive stickers. I slipped them into an outer pocket on my vest, where I could reach them easily. Then I headed for the airport, Hamster tagging along. In my mind I was already spending the EC money Geneva was going to pay me.

Once at Logan, I headed straight for the cabstand. I was betting that a plug with von Bulow's tastes wouldn't have taken mass transit.

Sure enough, the third cab I questioned was the one he had ridden in.

"I must see authorization first. If you have authorization, I must see it. Please show your authorization."

I fed my credentials into a slot. The cab seemed satisfied and spat them out. "Yes, sir, I picked up the human you describe. Here is his picture." The cab flashed a view of von Bulow that matched the digitals Geneva had shown me: dirty blonde hair atop a craggy profile, and dangerous lilac eyes. Handsome the way a purebred dog like a borzoi is, and likely just as neurotic and skittish. Some of those frigging European aristocrats are so inbred, especially now that they can fix up any little congenital trouble like leukemia or hemophilia, that they make the king of England look like a mongrel. This was not going to be an easy boot; I could feel it all the way down to my mitochondria.

"Here is his pedigree, as read by my chromosniffers, sir." Wave after wave of numbers and metagrafix rolled across the screen.

"O.K., give me a hard copy of both." The pedigree would be handy if von Bulow changed his looks. But I wasn't betting on that, as he seemed a self-satisfied type, too obsessed and complacent to imagine anyone might be after him.

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"Where'd you drop him?"

"Drop, sir? I am not allowed to injure humans—"

"What was his destination?"

"The Copley Plaza."

I should have guessed. It figured he'd vector for the biggest casino in town.

I drove so fast back into the city that my car's shell could barely keep up with the aerodynamic changes, shifting shape a dozen times a second. A metro dirty-harry in his fan-lifter buzzed me, but I transmitted a priority code that made him veer off. This case looked like it was going to be wrapped up sooner than I could have hoped.

At the Copley I went straight to the Registration console. It was actually being manned by a human, but that's just the Copley's policy: no splices on their staff, and all the ones owned by guests to be kept discreetly out of sight (except, of course, for bodyguards). I had to check Hamster at the stable.

The clerk was a piebald black man wearing a topknot laced with gold wire. I flashed him my card. "Mass Pee Eye." He blinked twice, without expression. I looked at my own ID. The stupid cab had left Siouxsie Sexcrime uppermost when it had read the card. I flexed the plaz back to the right creds.

"Yes, sir, how may I help you?"

Slipping my left hand into my vest pocket, I palmed the boot. "Do you have a guest named Jurgen von Bulow?"

The clerk ran a mental eidetic. "He just checked out this morning, sir."

Bugshit! "Let me guess. He broke the bank, wired his winnings to Paraguay, and caught a suborb south."

"No, sir, not quite. Mr. von Bulow lost heavily. In fact, had we not taken the precaution of predebiting his proxy — as we do with anyone who intends to play the games — he would not have had enough to pay his bill. As it was, he left here very much down on his luck. As I might phrase it, were I off-duty, 'His lily-white ass was dragging.'"

That didn't make sense. Either the casino games were rigged worse than a Fourth World election, or the stolen trope was junkbond. Neither alternative seemed likely.

"Did he happen to mention his plans?"

"No, sir, he did not."

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Flipper's arms had been melded to his torso, his legs fused shut from toes to crotch.

Dead end. I turned ruefully away.

Something bumped my ankles.

I looked down.

It was Flipper.

Flipper was a fishboy I knew from around town. He was a fuser, a member of a sect that sought personally to atone for the extermination of the dolphins. (They claimed humanity's guilt was not diminished by the subsequent restocking of the seas.) Flipper's arms had been melded to his torso, his legs fused shut from toes to crotch. He wore a slick gray suit that handled bodily functions and made him look like a sleek torpedo. He rode a little wheeled dolly that ran on fuel cells.

"Hey, Flip, what's metabolizing?"

"Not much. But I heard what you were asking the clerk just now."

"Why don't we go outside?"

I walked — and Flipper rolled — out the Copley. On the busy sidewalk, no one paid any attention to us.

"So, whatcha know, Flip?"

"I was hanging around the casino all day yesterday, hoping to hit a big winner up for a donation to the church. I saw the plug you're looking for. He was really off the far end of the spectrum. After a while, when he began zero-summing worse than ever, he started talking to himself. 'Turbulence,' he said. 'It's all turbulence, noise and strange attractors. I can't ride the flow.'"

Sounded to me like the tropes hadn't quite kicked in yet, or von Bulow was having a tough time coordinating the new dataflux.

"Yeah, go on."

"When he wiped out, he came up to me. 'Fishboy, I need some black meds. Who's on top in this town?'"

"And you sent him to —"

"Who else? The Vat Rats."

I nodded. It was a solid lead.

"Thanks, Flip. I'd shake your hand if it were possible."

"Screw that human chauvinism. Just make sure the church gets credited

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with a good-sized chunk of eft."

"Will do. Catch you later."

"Swim free."

I went back and got Hamster out of the stable, tipping the splice-check girl.

"Thank you, sir; it is good to see you again, sir; I was waiting most patiently, sir."

"Hamster, shut the fuck up."

"Immediately, sir."

We went looking for the Vat Rats.

OVER THE past century, Boston had been hit by a dozen gang invasions. First it was the Bloods and the Crips, out of L.A., back in the eighties and nineties. Then it was the Hong Kong tongs, when that entrepôt went Red. They segued into the Cambodians, Hispanics, Camspanics, Colombians, Novascots, Brazzes, Jamaicans.... Each had ruled the metro for a brief period that always ended in a bloody dustup, with the victors setting up shop. Finally, though, the pattern of foreign invasions had been disrupted by two factors: the establishment of the North American Union, and the dominance of tropes and other lab-bioactives over organic drugs. The NU had sewed up its borders tighter than a dose of Lipzip. That kept out the nonlocal competitors. And the slimemold spread of legal neurotropins through schools and socially sanctioned avenues created the young local biobrujos, who proceeded, with their home aminolinkers and chromocookers, to brew up the sublegal tropes and strobers. Various sets fell into particular special niches, turf struggles were minimal, the social order was not disrupted, and the authorities looked the other way at most of it.

Despite such a diffuse network and the impossibility of figuring out a strict hierarchy, there were some sets that had more status than others.

Those generalists, the Vat Rats, were one of the posses at the pinnacle.

The V-Rats lived in the labyrinth of abandoned pipes that had once fed sewerage into the formerly toxic harbor. When the whole city was retrofitted with D-compoz silicrobe sanitation units, there had been no need for the antique system. Every once in a while, someone still raised the topic of digging it all out, but the payback wasn't bottom-line enough, and the metro would just drop the matter.

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Cold water dripped down my neck. It felt like a zombie's caress. I stood in a pool of sludge up to the ankles of my boots. Hamster was shivering, but it wasn't from the cold.

We were surrounded by Rats, illuminated by my lantern. They all shared the dental moddies that gave them their name. Other than that, they were as motley a lot as your average set.

"Lookin' for some Rat poison, slimjim?"

"No, thanks. Let me see Zuma Puma."

"The Puma's a busy slagger. He don't see just anyone."

"He knows me."

The Rat looked dubious. "What's the logon, then?"

I told him.

"Wait here."

I waited. The Rats watched. One was gnawing what looked like a human femur. Hamster kept shivering.

"Calm down. No one's going to hurt you while I'm around."

"I cannot help it, sir. These are not nice folks."

The Rats tittered.

The spokes-Rat returned. "Puma'll see you."

"Like I said."

We exited the maze of pipes into a big bubble-room littered with personal effects: the Rats' nest. A door led to the Puma's private quarters. Hamster and I went through alone.

The Zuma Puma reclined on a pile of cushions. He wore flexible thermoplastic armor. From out the neck, wrists, and ankles of the armor protruded tawny fur. His face was bare. A playpet I recognized as a Green Canary model sat beside him, stroking his fur. When we entered, she let out a brief trill of song.

"Haven't seen you in a while, slagger," said the Puma.

"Not since I saved your tail from the Marrow Mothers."

The Puma laughed. "That's one version of the story."

"Commonly called 'the truth.' For which I figure you owe me a favor."

"Depends on the magnitude."

"You had a client this morning." I described von Bulow. "What did he want?"

"Sorry, slagger, can't tell you that. You know all our transactions are eyes-only. Who'd come to us if they thought we'd, ah, rat on them?"

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"You know it won't get any further than this room."

The Puma was feeling mean. "Sorry. Anything else?"

I pulled my shocker off my hip. The Puma laughed.

"What are you gonna do with that toy, knock me out? When I come to, you still won't know anything."

I aimed at his chest and pulled the trigger. The dart embedded its microhooks into his armor.

"Bad shot, slagger. This stuff's an insulator."

"I know." I sent current down the wire. The Puma stiffened boardlike out on his couch, just like a window shutter.

"The fuel cell in this is rated for a month of constant output. When I leave by your bolt-hole with your Canary, your Rats will try breaking in. I don't imagine they'll succeed, given your security. I understand dying of thirst is particularly nasty."

"I'll sue the cartel that sold me this piece of shit armor!"

"Only if you tell me what I want to know."

The Puma gave an exaggerated sigh. "O.K. The guy wouldn't let us unravel his blood. That made us curious, and we were gonna try for a sample anyway. But he was launch-on-warning, and pulled a flashlight on us. Put a quick end to any fiddle and diddle, and we desisted. He proceeded to describe his prob. Sounded like he needed a high-powered math co-processor and some grafix wetware. We laid them in, and it seemed to satisfy him."

"He say what he intended to do with 'em?"

"Hey, it's getting hard to breathe in this suit—"

"It'll only get harder. C'mon. Where was he going?"

"Well, our fee pretty much wiped him out. He wanted to know where he could get a big stake to gamble with. I told him the casinos in this town were too conservative to loan him anything. It's true, you know: Boston's as far out of things as the Oort Cloud. I sent him to Atlantic City."

"Right." I reeled the dart back in. The Puma relaxed.

"You make it hard to act friendly," he said.

"Not my biggest worry. See you around, Zee Pee."

Back on the streets, I joined a line at a Bank of Boston machine. Flipper's tip had paid off, and I was going to credit the church's account before I headed for Atlantic City.

The guy in front of me took back his card from the machine. He went

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to pocket it, then something made him halt. He looked at his card, swore, then drew his gun and fired into the bank machine.

The machine let out an electronic squeal. It shot out of its wall-alcove on four wheels and tried to race off. It knocked down a salesman. The salesman's sample case hit the ground and broke open. Shards of music filled the air. A woman screamed. The guy with the gun fired again. This time he brought the machine down.

A crowd was collecting around the shattered and smoking bank machine. The smell of frying circuits hung thick in the air. The angry customer bulled through the bystanders. He reached into the machine's guts and retrieved his original card. "Fucking mimics," he said. "Last time my card was stolen, I lost fifteen thousand NU-dollars."

"It's a hard world," said someone in the crowd, with incomplete sincerity.

"Bet on it," said the guy, and patted his holstered gun.

THE MEGLEV trip from Boston to Atlantic City was a good ninety minutes plus. Von Bulow was a few hours ahead of me, and there was no way I was going to catch up with him any faster than this. I was just as glad. It gave me a little time to think.

Hamster sat asleep in the seat beside me. I couldn't say why I was bringing the splice along. It would have been just as happy sitting at home, watching the special thrid-vid channels, and Papa Legba knows it was absolutely no help on a case. Maybe I needed the company. Maybe I felt Hamster was my good-luck talisman. Maybe my dendrites were tangled. What the hell, though. The little trans rode for half-fare.

I scratched behind Hamster's ears while I considered the case.

Von Bulow must be a certifiable monomaniac. Here he was, carrying some codes in his blood that, if they worked, he could sell to any of a dozen companies for practically a year's GNP from PacRim. Instead, he was going to use them to get a few jolts from the casino games. I couldn't decrypt it. Maybe someone had wired his boards this way. For all I knew, he could be creaming in his jox every time the dealer called "vingt-et-un." I had run into kinkier stim-rep loops.

After half an hour, I gave up pondering the matter. I couldn't be bothered trying to figure out why people acted the crazy way they did. If I had any talents in that area, I would have been able to tell you why I came

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home one day to find my apartment packed solid with self-replicating Krazy Foam, and my wife gone. All I can handle is what people actually do, not whatever wordless impulses they might be working from. I had my assignment, and that was that. Geneva Hippenstiel-Imhausen wanted back what was hers, and I was being paid to get it for her.

I remembered the feel of her hot love-scar under my thumb, and wondered what else she wanted.

The scenery rushed by the single-crystal windows of the train in a blur like fast-forward video. Eventually, under New York, I dozed off for a few minutes, too. It had been a long day.

We pulled into A.C. about 8:00 P.M. Hamster and I debarked and made our way to the Boardwalk.

I hadn't been here since they rebuilt the Boardwalk behind the new dike that kept the rising Atlantic at bay. They had used Bechtel-Kanematsu-Gosho superwood, and elevated the structure four stories in the air, to wind its way past all the casinos. It was spectacular, in Atlantic City's usual tawdry style.

The walk was crowded with citizens and splices. Tourists gawked at the street performers. There was a crowd around a leotard-clad socket who had dosed herself with plenty of Bonemelt. She had put a half-twist in her body before grabbing her feet, turning herself into a human Möbius strip. To prove she was one-sided as she lay on her mat, she had little sucker-footed crawlers walking over her common ventral-dorsal surface. Good trick.

I stopped to grab a hot dog and an orange soda. If von Bulow was here, he would just be settling down, not moving on, and I could take my time.

"Want something?" I asked Hamster.

"Oh, yes, sir, if you please. One of those nice chili dogs, with extra sauce."

I made Hamster take its special supplement. One a day, or good-bye world. Sold only to registered human owners. That's why there're no runaway transgenics. Or not so many.

When we were finished, I crumpled my napkin and threw it on the Boardwalk. A litter-critter snatched it up.

"Let's go get Mr. von Bulow," I said to Hamster.

"If you say so, then that's what we must do, sir."

I found him inside the Time-Warner-Sears casino, at the roulette table.

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His ID card lay on the betting board, flexed to show his eft balance. He kept sliding the card from one red or black number to another, and his balance kept getting bigger and bigger. I watched him for a while. His lilac eyes were half-glazed over, his face wearing a zoned-out expression. The experimental H-I trope, as modified by the Vat Rats, was plainly a success. Von Bulow was rapt up in the nonlinear dynamics of the wheel, seeing chance and aleatory patterns materialized in intelligible forms that guided his play.

He never lost a spin. His balance was rising toward geostat orbit. His winning streak had attracted a crowd of ginza-joes and dolly-dears, house playpets and free-lance eft-lifters, not to mention members of the management, who stood around looking like they had swallowed a quart of worms. I doubted if they'd object when I booted von Bulow.

I worked my way to his side. The management had halted play to check the wheel and scan the crowd for remote interference. I used the opportunity.

"Jurgen, I've got a message from your wife."

He jumped. "What? Who are you? How do you know my wife?" He narrowed his eyes, as if to use his new insights to unriddle me. A muscle jerked along his jaw. "That is, if you even do know her."

"Ask not whom the panther roars for, slagger; it roars for you."

He pushed back his chair. "All right, all right, not here, for Christ's sake. Let's step outside."

We walked out to a deserted balcony. Overhead the stars glistened like scales on a snake. Von Bulow and I stood about four feet apart. I sensed Hamster by my side.

"Geneva wants her trope back, Jurgen."

He snorted. "Let her come and get it."

"She was busy, so she sent me instead." I had the boot concealed in my palm.

Before I could move, I was facing his flashlight, a Krupp pocket model.

"Don't complicate things, Jurgen —," I said, then went for him.

Laserlight lanced past my side, scorching my vest so I could smell burning ripstop. One shot was all he got off before I slapped the boot on his neck.

The neural shunt burrowed under his skin and fastened itself to his spinal cord in a millie. Von Bulow collapsed to the floor.

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I turned around. Hamster was twitching with a scorched hole through its tunic over its heart. I went over to the splice and picked it up.

"Not nice, not nice, sir—," it said, then died.

I went back to von Bulow. First I kicked him half a dozen times in the gut and balls. He didn't say anything, because he couldn't feel anything below his neck, and couldn't see what I was doing. Then I slapped an orange sticker on him to show he was booted. I got an autochair from the casino, put him in it, and headed for the train station.

As predicted, the management put up no fuss. I left Hamster for them to dispose of. Geneva would find a surcharge on her bill.

At the station I copped a dose of Double-up from a public S&M parlor.

The ninety minutes back to Boston was enough to express my displeasure fully to von Bulow.

I was going to have to mention to Geneva to block her ears when she had the boot removed.

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Ronald Anthony Cross's last story here was "All the Way to Teelee Town" (September 1990), which was off-Earth science fiction. Mr. Cross, not one to repeat himself, returns with a touching contemporary fantasy . . .

Reflection in a Window

By Ronald Anthony Cross

IT DID SEEM like the sort of place that might be haunted, I thought, looking out the big window at the lake. It was one of those gray murky days that are so common when you get this far north. As I stood watching the mist rising off the lake, it was as if time froze, and for a moment nothing moved: not the mist, or the waters, not even my normally restless thoughts.

Then a flash of blue leaped across the sky and fell and bounced in the tall, wet grass. Screamed defiantly. It must have been the jay who owned the house, I thought, as the furious little figure flapped its wings and squawked and hopped aggressively toward my figure in the window, and then started and backed away, again and then again.

Tina, the real estate agent, poked her head in the door tentatively, obviously fearing to invade upon my space. Probably something she had learned in one of her real estate seminars, I imagined.

"You like?" her head said, not quite yet allowing her body to follow.

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"Too big, though; remember, I told you it was too big." Reminding me that what I had here was an honest saleswoman.

"I like too big," I said.

Apparently finding the encouragement it was waiting for, her head retreated, and finally her whole person entered bravely into the room.

This act of timidity did not fool me; as I have said, she doubtlessly learned the whole routine in some sort of twenty-four-hour sales intensive. And though it may have been effective, it hardly seemed suitable for Tina's confident personality.

She was one of the new women, so very different from me. Most of the time, I do not know whether the emotion I feel toward them is envy or pity. Perhaps both. They've gained so much. Lost so much.

Right now, for instance, too-tall Tina was just dying for a cigarette. Shuffling her feet, trying to look cool, but rubbing the thumb and forefinger of her right hand together, glancing around with her too-bright eyes unable to settle on anything: the obvious signs of addiction. Apparently, another thing she had learned in her intensive was not to put off the prospective buyer by blowing smoke in her face: who knows but that he or she may be one of those fanatics who doesn't want to die of cancer.

"Listen, Helen, sweetie, you just make yourself at home. Look around, O.K.? I've got a couple of errands to run, quickies. Be back in a jiff. You just look the place over. 'kay?"

Relieved at having secured her smoke, her whole body visibly relaxed. She strode confidently out of the room. But once again her head, dissatisfied, popped back in. Impish expression exaggerated by short, boyish haircut. "Did I tell you it's haunted?" she asked gleefully. (Only twenty times.) "But hey, no need to worry. Only the subtlest of ghosts dare invade the northlake district. It's too exclusive. Only the ghosts of ghosts," she added.

"Like that jay out here?" I said.

"Oh, that little beggar's no ghost," she said. "He thinks he owns the place, but he hasn't got the money. See ya."

Head popped back out. A moment later I heard the snarl of the nasty little bright-red sports car (the right to self-destructiveness, foolishness), and then gravel crunching as she churned up and out the driveway.

Then silence. And the lake. Even the jay had gone quiet now, and just stood sort of stretched up out of the tall grass, peeking in the window at me.

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The other door opened, and I turned to see with some amusement that Patrick had adopted Tina's doorway-peeking-in tactics.

"Place is too damn big," he said.

"Of course it's too big," I answered.

"Will you let me finish, woman? As I was saying, place is too damn big for the queen and all the royal family, and courtesans and royal maids-in-waiting and court jester and all. Too expensive, too."

"And as I was saying," I said, "of course it's too big. But won't Aaron love it, though. Right on the lake. And tell you what else he'll love about it. Did you see that little blue smart-ass cussing us out from the front lawn?"

"Blue jay," Patrick said. "Aye, he'll love that, all right. The boy is crazy about the birds and the bees and all the wee little beasties of the wood and brier. A little too crazy, if you ask me."

"Who would ever ask you?" I said. "And what's with all this Irish talk? Just because your great-great-great-grandmother once took a vacation somewhere in Europe doesn't mean. . . ."

"And why was it they named me Patrick, then?" He smiled. "Ah, Helen, my sweet, the truth is that I'm so Irish in the soul, it doesn't matter a whit where I was born."

The charming rogue of a psuedo-Irishman put one of his big hands on my shoulder and squeezed. Sending a myriad assortment of exciting messages racing up and down my nervous system to different parts of my body. As always.

"The only thing Irish about you is that you drink too much. Where is Aaron, by the way?"

"In the first place, I do not drink even one drop too much. Only the exact, precise amount necessary to make me happy, and amorous. In the second place, you're bad-mouthing the Irish. Who says the Irish drink? That's just a stereotype, my love. Why, the Irish no more drink than the Mafia is run by Italians."

"Where's Aaron?"

"Where do you suppose the boy would be? Out running around the yard, swimming in the lake, exploring this enormous maze of a house, maybe knocking off a quick piece with one of the French chambermaids in one of the upper-floor bedrooms. You know, the one with the tennis court in it."

I reached up and pulled his beard.

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"Ouch!"

"It is too big, isn't it?"

"My God, woman, it's too big for the Lord God himself."

"He had only one kid, you know," I said.

"Just don't tell me it was Aaron," he groused; leaned over and kissed me.

"Listen, while the kid is elsewhere occupied, and the saleswoman — pardon me, salesperson — is out catering to whichever of her vices is most pressing at the moment, could we not make some use of these bedrooms? I feel like a nap."

"You do drink too much," I said. "I can smell it on your breath." And for some strange reason, I choked up and started to cry.

"Sorry," I stammered.

"Oh honey, what is it?" He looked genuinely concerned, but then, as I said, he was such a rogue that you could never tell.

"It's no big deal. I'll cut down."

"You'll never cut down on anything," I said, regaining control of myself. "You'll just keep on cutting up."

He held out his hands as if to ward off whatever I was saying, but his eyes were bright and humorous.

Just then we caught the sound of running footsteps, and Aaron exploded into the room. At least he hadn't adopted Tina's peeking-in tactics.

I remember thinking right then, Of course he loves the birds, the bees and the little beasties of the brier. He's one of them.

He was such a beautiful boy. So like an elf or some nature spirit. Wild, curly hair that could never be tamed. Patrick's big black eyes — only, with more wonder in them and less of himself. His lofty, high, broad forehead and narrow, pointed chin. And his lovely, slender body, graceful as a greyhound's.

"Helen, Helen, Helen," he piped. "There're some kind of birds out on the lake. Are they loons? I saw them from the upstairs window, but I can't make them out. Can't I have a cat?"

"He'll eat the loons," Patrick said. "And why can't you call your mother 'Mother'?"

"Her name is Helen. Besides, why don't *you* call her 'Mother'?" Point made, he smiled, causing the whole world to smile, as usual.

"How can a cat catch a loon? Cats can't swim."

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"And who told you that, you little know-it-all?" Patrick teased. "If cats can't swim, then how the hell did they develop such a taste for fish?"

Aaron put his hand on top of his head, to help him think, and said: "Gee, I never thought of that." Then smiled again. Only, this time it was his mischievous smile. "But we can teach it not to swim, right, Helen? If you can teach something how to do something, you ought to be able to teach something how not to do it."

"How 'bout a dog?" Patrick bargained.

"No, I like cats better than dogs." (That's my boy!)

"Cats are nasty little things that don't have enough brains to fetch the master his morning paper and slippers," Patrick argued.

"That's because you don't read the morning paper and you don't wear slippers."

Patrick shrugged. "Who ever said I was the master?"

"Not I," I said, finally getting in my two cents' worth.

"Of course you can have a cat, honey." I reached out my arms, and he darted into them, so naturally, so automatically. Each time he did this now, I felt a stab of fear along with the pleasure, the almost unbearable sense of comfort. For very soon he would be too much of a man. "You can have anything." I hugged him to me.

"Great," Patrick said. "At least we can count on you not to spoil the kid."

"Of course I'll spoil him," I said. "Why shouldn't I spoil him?"

"Because," Patrick growled out the word, "as everybody with a grain of sense knows" — he grabbed Aaron away from me and plunged the boy into the air and held him there triumphantly — "spoiled things stink."

Aaron laughed exultantly, but it was not from the joke; it was just from the joy of being held high in the secure grip of a strong man much as he would become.

"Jeez, this kid's getting too heavy for me. Either I'm getting old, or he is." But Patrick was lying. He probably could have done the same thing to me, and in fact, occasionally had. Lack of physical strength was not one of his problems.

"Put me down, put me down; I want to run out to the lake. Race you. Race you to the lake, Pat."

"Get out of here and race yourself to the lake. At least you'll win that one. I'll be along in a bit."

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I spread my arms again; and again, thank all the gods, it worked. And then he was gone from the room, just like that. Outside, he leaped up and shouted, "Boo!", and I turned, but too late. All I caught was my own reflection in the window, so transparent that through it I picked up his small form racing across the lawn, so far away so fast.

"What's the matter with you today, Helen?" Patrick sounded concerned, but, as I said, with Patrick, who really knows?

"I don't know," I said. I was crying again. All this man-to-man stuff. Truth was, no matter how hard I tried to express my love, in how many ways, there was a bond between the two of them that I could never.... He was his father's boy. As are they all, I suppose.

"I don't know," I said. "Got the blues, I guess. Wish we could take the house. But it's just too big, isn't it?"

"Helen, I told you that at the start. Everyone told you that."

"Aaron will be disappointed."

"He'll live," he said.

Just then I heard the gravelly crunch of Tina's car's wheels coming up the drive. I turned toward the sound and said, "Oh damn, Tina's back already." Which made me laugh. My mood was picking up a bit here. But when I turned, Patrick was standing in the doorway staring at me, and his expression was strangely sad. I couldn't help being amused at the thought that we switched moods.

"Where the hell are you going?"

But without a word, he was gone.

Tina came in the other door. Peeked in, rather. Then came in.

"Hi, let me guess. Too big? I don't even know why you bothered to see it after everyone told you it was...."

"Maybe we can work something out," I said cheerfully. "Aaron loves it. He's down by the lake now. I know Patrick will come around. Speaking of which, just where the hell is he? He was here a minute ago." My speech dwindled off when I saw her expression. She looked dumbfounded; no, not so much that as agonized.

"Helen, honey, I don't.... I brought you here in my car, remember? You came here alone. Honey, I just don't know how to.... You're not married, Helen. Your fiancé, Patrick, he ... died in a car crash. Remember? You told me that because you said it was some kind of little red sportscar like mine. It made you nervous to be in it. He'd been drinking.

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Helen, honey, that was . . . was several years ago."

Could that awful whining noise be coming from me? And why was I breathing so fast? So fast, and not getting any air.

I surely would have fallen had she not put her arms around me and held me up. And they were strong arms, but not so strong as Patrick's.

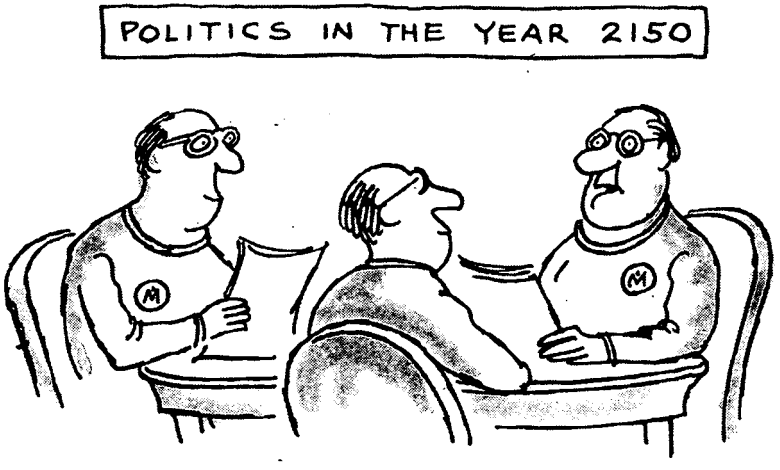
"Then Aaron is . . . then Aaron has never been . . . then Aaron . . . then Aaron. . . ." I could not say it. But it lay there heavy on the air. Unsaid. Undone.

"This son of a bitch is haunted, all right," was all I could say, and then I broke down crying. There in her arms.

Later, when she was driving me back, she said: "At least you have your career. All those books you've illustrated for children. The joy you've brought them. That must really mean something to you."

"Oh Tina," I said, trying to keep from crying again, "believe me, Tina, listen to me carefully here and believe me, if you never believe anything else you ever hear: It is not enough."

For a while she drove in silence, then she smiled and shook her head and said softly, "Nothing ever is."



"We need a scapegoat. Thaw somebody out."

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

TRAPPING THE RAINBOW

A WEEK AGO, as I write this, I got out of a taxi and stood there for a moment, trying to get some coins back into my change purse. I realized, though, that I was still standing in the road and that other taxis were converging on me.

Unwilling to give any taxi-driver the embarrassment of crushing me under his wheels (it's my nature, always thinking of the other fellow), I stepped back in order to be out of the way. In doing so, I forgot that the curb was exactly behind me. I stubbed my heel on it, lost my balance, and fell onto the sidewalk.

I must admit that my sense of balance has deteriorated somewhat as my late youth has gotten later, but I have occasionally fallen even in my earlier youth. Ordinarily, when I do fall, I reject all help and struggle to my feet by myself even if I am in discomfort and pain — it's a matter of pride. (Of course, I couldn't do it if I had broken a bone in a fall, but I have been lucky enough never to have done that.)

This time, though, there was a great deal less alacrity about my efforts to right myself. My hat had flown off, and I presume the sight of my gray hair and white sideburns activated the feelings of a young man who had been carefully taught by his parents to be kind to the aged.

He was at my side in a moment, helping me up with his vigorous young muscles, and so far into my late youth had I now progressed that (oh, shame!) I *let* him. He handed me back my hat, and I thanked him. When he asked me, with concern, if I were hurt, I said, "Not at all," (salvaging some vestige of my pride), and then I looked at him as he smiled and walked away.

He was about thirty, I should judge, tall, slim, with a neat brown beard, and as handsome as the day. I immediately thought —

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way it's supposed to be. It should have been a beautiful young woman who had tripped over the curb. My rescuer should have rescued *her*; their eyes should have met and an electricity should have sparked between them; and it should have been the beginning of a wonderful romance.

Of what use was it for him to have wasted himself on a gray-haired man in his late youth? But that's the way the world is.

In science, for instance, there is nothing as young and slim and handsome as a Nobel Prize, and sometimes it is wasted on someone not quite worthy of it. I'll give you an example in the course of continuing last month's discussion of photography, but, if you don't mind, I must take a rather sizable detour first.

My discussion, this month, begins with a Danish physician named Erasmus Bartholin (1625-1698), who was one of the gentlemen-researchers in whom the 17th Century was rife. In 1669, he received a transparent crystal from Iceland, something which was therefore called "Iceland spar," "spar" being an old Teutonic term applied to some minerals. It is actually a form of calcium carbonate.

Bartholin noticed that when he looked through the Iceland spar, objects on the other side seemed to be doublé. He investigated the phenomenon and found that a ray of light, passing obliquely through Iceland spar, was bent or "refracted," as it would be through other transparent materials, such as water or glass. Through Iceland spar, however, the light was refracted into *two* rays. Part of the light was refracted to a greater extent than the rest, and Bartholin called the effect "double refraction."

Just a few years earlier, the English scientist Isaac Newton (1642-1727) had studied light refraction through a prism and had found that light, in that case, was refracted to different extents, with the formation of a broad spectrum, that is, a rainbow of colors. It seemed that different colors of light combine to form what we sense as "white light," but that since each is refracted by a different amount, in passing through a prism, the white light is separated into a continuous band of colors.

What Bartholin had observed was something different. The light didn't show a steady change of refraction into a band of light, but showed a sharp separation into two rays, each of which was white.

Bartholin couldn't explain this phenomenon of double refraction. Neither could Newton, who thought that light consisted of tiny particles. Why some particles should pass

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through Iceland spar with one degree of refraction, and other particles with another, he couldn't tell.

A competing theory of light was advanced by the Dutch scientist Christian Huygens (1629-1695), who felt that light consisted of longitudinal waves, as sound does, with each wave oscillating forward and back in the direction of the propagation of the light ray. Huygens couldn't explain double refraction, either.

You may think that if there was a phenomenon that could not be explained by either of the two theories of light, then those theories were *wrong* and should be instantly abandoned, and some new theory sought for. That is not quite the way science works. Both Newton's theory and Huygens' theory explained a great deal. Each, it was true, must be incomplete if double refraction didn't fit in, but it was only fair to continue studying the implications of each theory. Further investigation would probably demonstrate which of the two theories was the more nearly correct, and eventually, there would be refinements that would then include the phenomenon of double refraction. In other words, the theories were not *wrong enough* to abandon immediately (see "The Relativity of Wrong," F&SF, October 1986).

Double refraction was therefore put to one side, and, as it happened, it stayed to one side for a century and a half.

In 1808, the Paris Academy of Sciences offered a prize for anyone who could plausibly explain double refraction, and a French military engineer, Etienne Louis Malus (1775-1812), investigated the matter. Working with a crystal of Iceland spar, he found that if he turned it at certain angles, one of the two rays that emerged would disappear. Again, if he allowed the double ray of light to fall on a surface of water at a certain angle, one of the rays would pass into the water, and the other would be reflected.

Malus thought that light must exist in two forms, rather akin to the way in which magnets had a north pole and a south pole. Perhaps it was the peculiar property of Iceland spar to separate those two poles of light, where other substances did not. If one of those rays was reflected off water, while the other was absorbed, then the reflected rays would consist of only one of those poles. It would be "polarized light." Malus's theory turned out to be quite wrong, but his name lived on and we still speak of polarized light.

Malus's method of producing polarized light by reflection from a water surface was not practical. In 1828, however, a British physicist,

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William Nicol (1768-1851), began with a crystal of Iceland spar. He cut it into two along the short diagonal and then stuck the halves together again by placing a thin layer of "Canadian balsam" between them as a kind of cement. The Canadian balsam layer was transparent, and its refractive ability was intermediate between those of the two rays of light that Iceland spar produced.

Light passing through the first half of the Iceland spar crystal was split in two. One of the rays was bent slightly further by the Canadian balsam and was sent to one side, while the other ray was slightly unbent and passed right through the second half without much change in direction. In other words, ordinary light entered this "Nicol prism," but polarized light emerged.

In this way, polarized light became an easily obtainable item for scientists to play with, and, indeed, it became an essential tool for the determination of molecular structures, a subject I will discuss in another essay some day.

By the time the Nicol prism was invented, the true explanation of double refraction had been advanced.

In 1801, a British physicist, Thomas Young (1773-1829), had sent rays of light through very narrow openings and showed that separate bands of light appeared where there should have been nothing but the sharply shadowed boundary of the edge of the openings. From this, he demonstrated that light rays showed the property of "interference"; that is, on some occasions, two light rays would add to each other to produce added light, while on other occasions, they would cancel each other to produce darkness.

It was difficult to see how light rays could cancel each other if they consisted of particles, but very easy to explain it if the rays consisted of waves. Young's experiments led the way, therefore, to the victory of Huygens' theory of light over that of Newton. (Actually, we have learned that light waves and all other waves have particle-properties, too; while all particles have wave-properties, too — but we needn't worry about that here.)

Young adhered to Huygens's notion of light as consisting of longitudinal waves, and that could no more explain double refraction in 1801 than it could in 1665.

In 1814, however, a French physicist, Augustin Jean Fresnel (1788-1827), made the suggestion that light consisted of *transverse* waves, waves that undulated up and down in a direction at right angles to the direction of propagation. In other words, light waves did not resemble

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sound waves, but resembled rather the kind of waves we see on the surface of still water when we drop a pebble into it.

The transverse-wave theory of light explained everything that the longitudinal-wave theory of light did, and, *in addition*, explained double refraction, which otherwise could not be explained.

To see that, imagine that you are holding one end of a long rope attached to a tree in the distance. The rope passes between two of the pickets of a closely-spaced picket fence that exists half-way between you at one end of the rope and the tree on the other. Suppose you shake your end of the rope up and down so as to make waves that are analogous to Fresnel's transverse waves. The waves would pass right through the space between the pickets.

But what if you shook the rope from side to side and created horizontal waves. They would still be transverse because they would also exist at right angles to the direction of propagation. However, such horizontal waves would not pass through the space in the fence but would be stopped by the pickets on either side.

In other words, you can create waves in the rope in any direction, but only the up-and-down waves will get through the picket fence. The rope-waves would be, in this way, polarized.

In crystals, the atoms and molecules are arranged in regular array, and there are channels running both vertically and horizontally between those atoms and molecules. These channels resemble the spaces between the pickets of a fence. You can imagine light waves passing through the crystal, some waving in one direction and some in another, with all the directions at right angles to the path of propagation equally represented.

Each wave is split into two parts that are at right angles to each other, one passing through the vertical channels, the other through the horizontal ones. Each of the two have a slightly different tendency to refract so that you start with a ray of "unpolarized" light and end up with two rays of light polarized at right angles to each other. In a Nicol prism, only one of those rays gets through.

This meant there was nothing unique about Iceland spar. Polarization is actually a common phenomenon and doesn't even need crystals. Though direct sunlight is totally unpolarized, reflected sunlight is usually polarized to some extent.

For delivering a totally polarized ray of light, nothing could substitute for the Nicol prism for over a century.

There were certain organic (car-

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bon-containing] crystals that would polarize light that passed through it. If one could get a crystal of such a substance large enough, it would do the job more simply and cheaply than a Nicol prism would. However, making a large enough crystal of such substances would be very difficult, and even if one succeeded, it would be far too fragile to use.

This problem interested Edwin Herbert Land (b. 1909), who was an undergraduate at Harvard College at the time. It occurred to him that it was not necessary to use a single large crystal. Many small, even microscopic, crystals would do, if they were all oriented so as to lie with their channels parallel to each other. This could be done, but how could they then be forced to maintain that position?

Land quit school in order to work on the problem, and, in 1932, when he was only 23 years old, he solved it. He lined up the crystals in a clear liquid plastic and when the plastic hardened, the crystals were held firmly in place. A thin sheet of such a plastic would act as a polarizer.

Land called the plastic sheet "Polaroid." It replaced the Nicol prism at once, but, as far as the general public was concerned, it was in sun-glasses that it found its most important use. The use of partially opaque glasses got rid of some of the glare of Sunlight, but did so at the cost of dimming vision dangerously. Polaroid allowed only part of the light to get through, and did it in such a way that the glare was reduced with greater efficiency and yet with less general dimming.

What has all this to do with photography? It made Land a rich man and gave him laboratory facilities in which research could be carried on with greater ease, so he turned his attention to photography.

All practical home photography, from the very beginning of the art right down to Land, was black-and-white. The photographic emulsions reacted in only one way to any color of light that it reacted to at all, so that all one got were light-dark combinations.

It might seem an insuperable job to photograph every different shade and tint of color separately — to trap the rainbow, so to speak — but the first indication that the problem was not as complex as it appeared came from Thomas Young, who had established the wave theory of light. In 1807, he suggested that all the various colors could be built up by different combinations of three basic colors: red, green and blue.

And, indeed, it eventually turned out that there are three kinds of receptors in the retina of the eye that are particularly sensitive to red,

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green, and blue respectively. It is the combination of the extent to which each is sensitized that gives us our sensation of myriads of colors.

Young's theory was expanded and refined by the German physicist Hermann L. F. Helmholtz (1821-1894), so that the three-color system is usually known as the "Young-Helmholtz theory."

The first attempt to obtain color photographs did not, however, make use of the three-color theory. In the 1850's, the French physicist Alexandre-Edmond Bacquerel (1820-1891) made use of silver subchloride on a silver plate. He managed to get different colors developed, but it was simply a laboratory curiosity, for when the colors were exposed to light, they began to dim and soon vanished entirely. (Becquerel, though a good scientist, was far outshone by his son, who discovered radioactivity in 1896.)

The British scientist James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879), just at about the time Becquerel was producing his colors, was insisting that the best way to achieve colored photographs was to take them in three different colors, then combine the three to get a single photograph that would trap all the colors of the rainbow.

In 1869, the first attempts in this direction were made, independently, by two Frenchmen, Charles Cros (1842-1888) and Louis Arthur du Hauron (1837-1910), but neither was able to prepare color photographs that were permanent.

The first person to prepare permanent color photographs was Gabriel Jonas Lippmann (1845-1921), who was born in Luxembourg of French parents, and who lived and worked in France. He did it in 1894, and he did *not* use the three-color process.

What he did was to place his photographic emulsion on a layer of mercury. Light passed through the emulsion, struck the mercury surface and was reflected. The reflected light passed through the emulsion again. The two kinds of light, incident and reflected, crossed each other and formed interference bands. Each different wavelength contributed differently to the interference, and the result, in the end, was a color photograph. The colors were sharp and true and the photograph was permanent.

In 1908, the Nobel prize committee met and decided to give shares of the physics prize for that year to the American inventor Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931) and the Croatian-American inventor Nikola Tesla (1856-1943). Tesla, however, a man who was eccentric almost to the point of psychosis, would have nothing to do with Edison who (he felt, with some justice)

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had cheated him. He refused to accept a prize in conjunction with his great enemy.

The Nobel committee, fearing a nasty fight and bad publicity (the Nobel Prize was only seven years old and had not yet attained that semi-divine status it now has), decided not to give the prize to either. Instead, they awarded it to Gabriel Lippmann for his invention of color photography.

I think it was a mistake. Lippmann was a good scientist of the second rank, and his scheme of color photography was extremely ingenious, but just the same the work was not of Nobel Prize quality. The trouble, you see, was that to make the photograph by his technique required relatively long exposures, and there was no way of making copies. Consequently, Lippmann's method was never used by others and it had no relationship to the practical color photography that eventually came to pass. And there you have the connection with my initial anecdote of the handsome young man who helped a gray-haired old man to his feet, when by all the laws of romance he should have helped a beautiful young woman.

What I think the Nobel Prize committee should have done was to have picked either Edison or Tesla, since each was worth it. And I would have picked Tesla. Tesla may have been a somewhat nutty genius, but Edison was a somewhat ruthless one, and I prefer nuttiness.

The first practical three-color process of color photography was advanced in 1907 by two French photographers, the brothers Auguste Lumiere (1862-1954) and Louis Lumiere (1864-1948). Their last name, by the way, is the French word for "lamp," so it was only appropriate for them to work with light.

What they did was to place under the photographic emulsion a film containing three dyes: red, yellow, and blue. Different wavelengths of light reacted with the film in different ways, here and there, according to the nature of the light reaching that part of the film. In the end, colors formed on the film that more or less duplicated those of the scene being photographed. This is called "additive color" because the effect of the different dyes is added to the light after it passes through the emulsion.

Additive color, however, did not quite reproduce the colors of the scene being photographed in true enough fashion. Nor were the pictures sharp enough.

In the 1930's, the people at Kodak worked out an alternate method of color photography, in which films with colored dyes were placed in *front* of the photographic emulsion.

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Each dye subtracted certain wavelengths from a particular region of light as it reached the emulsion. The final result is the "subtractive color" method, and this gave true colors and sharper images, so that it replaced the additive color method almost at once.

The color photographs, whether additive or subtractive, were at first produced on transparent film. One had to look at them through a hand-held viewer pointed at some light source; or one had to project them onto a screen. Projection onto a screen made it practical to have motion pictures in color, something that was pioneered in a Disney short in 1932, and came to flower in the feature movie "Becky Sharp" in 1935.

It was not till 1942 that a practical process was invented whereby the color could be transferred onto paper so that a person could hold something that is exactly like an old black-and-white photograph except that it is in full color.

Even then, the fact that World War II was on slowed down the rate at which such color-prints entered the general market, and it was not till the 1950's that they became commonly available.

In 1963, Land, who had devised the self-developing black-and-white print, modified the procedure to include the appropriate dyes in the camera (making use of new and simplified theories of his own in place of the old Young-Helmholtz three-color theory). As a result, people were able to point their camera, press the button, and, within a minute, have a developed color photograph.

Even this is not enough. Ordinary photographs, even the most advanced instant-color ones, are only two-dimensional cross-sections of a three-dimensional scene. In 1947, however, the Hungarian-British physicist Dennis Gabor (1900-1979) thought of a way of adding a third dimension.

Suppose that a beam of light is split in two. One part strikes an object and is reflected with all the irregularities that this object would impose on it. The second part is reflected from a mirror and gains no irregularities. The two parts meet at the photographic film, and the interference pattern is photographed. If light is then allowed to pass through the film, it takes on the interference characteristics and produces a three-dimensional image in mid-air, one that is of startling realism and and can be viewed, to some extent, from different angles.

This is called "holography," because it gives the whole image and not just a two-dimensional projection.

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Gabor supplied the theory, but holography could not easily be put into practice until laser beams of coherent light became available. In 1965, two scientists, Emmet N. Leith and Juris Upatnieks, were able to produce the first holographs. By 1971, holography had done enough to make it seem warranted to award Gabor a Nobel Prize for physics.

Despite that, however, holography is still in the hands of specialists and experts. Techniques for making it accessible to the general public, so that holographic images can be produced as easily and as satisfactorily as ordinary photographs, do not yet exist, and may not exist for quite some time.

Still, even holography is not enough. Any image, whether on a photograph or a holograph, whether two-dimensional or three-dimensional, catches a scene as it is only during some particular instant.

What we need is to add the fourth dimension of time, so that we can see the image moving.

If we didn't know better, we would think that this, finally, is an impossible requirement. Once it was found that silver salts break down and blacken in the presence of light, photography became conceivable in minds with sufficient imagination; and since white light is composed of different colors, color photography becomes conceivable, too. And since the existence of three dimensional images at the foci of concave parabolic mirrors is known, even holography is conceivable.

But pictures that move! Surely that is too much.

And yet it was a requirement that was surprisingly easy to meet. In fact, pictures could be made to move well before they could be given color.

I will, therefore, take up the subject of pictures that move next month.

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Stephen Kraus writes that he "lives in deepest Silicon Valley with my wife, Nina, our son Max and assorted livestock." He works in the computer graphics field and founded a company that makes systems for creating special effects. His first story for F&SF is a compelling SF tale about a molecular surgeon and his most difficult case.

Behind the Barrier

By Stephen Kraus

THE FIRE IN his tree's uppermost branches edged her short, dark hair in crimson, and its thousand silvery leaves mirrored her eyes.

She ran her fingers through her hair, smoothed her dress — irridescent batik, Conrad noticed, as if she were attending a business meeting. She was hurtingly beautiful. And dying, of course. Nothing else would have brought her back.

"Hello, Greta," he said. His voice surprised him. It sounded steady and dispassionate; not at all how he felt.

She turned toward him, incuriously, still intrigued by the tree. "Good morning, Conrad. I didn't hear you come in."

She offered her hand. The contact crackled with static charge, lingered.

"How long has it been?"

"Three years," he answered, too quickly. "Three years and two months."

She nodded and looked around the office. There wasn't much to interest her: a desk with a holo cube at one corner, a long metaglass wall

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with the gray city twenty floors below. And the tree, of course, his only ornament. She touched one of its slender shoots.

"It's beautiful, Conrad. It seems out of place here."

He smiled. "Not at all. It's a metaphor for the circulatory system. The trunk is the heart. The limbs are the major arteries and veins — that's the superior vena cava right above you. The twigs are the capillaries, and so forth."

She watched the frozen fire lick at its crowning branches. "Why is it burning?"

"The fire represents the blood-brain barrier. Unknown territory."

She looked disappointed. "It's some kind of instrument, then?"

"Yes. A data tree. I use it to navigate through the body. Imagine a three-dimensional road map. Starting from the heart, I can travel anywhere, to within a few cells."

He stopped himself short of a lecture, and asked her to sit down. She did so haltingly. *Ataxia,* he thought. Somehow it added to her grace.

Conrad blinked on his corneal monitor and rolled her chart across his field of vision. It showed a lymphoma with a poor prognosis. The condition had been diagnosed more than a year earlier. He scrolled down farther. The display blurred. He had to blink away tears before he could read it again.

Personal data: age thirty, unmarried, no children. He'd known all that — he had a global search function that scanned the public databases for references to her. She was the executive vice president of a chemical engineering firm. He'd known that, too.

"Your career is going well," he said.

"Yes. I haven't had time for much else."

Even sitting, she never stopped moving. She clasped her hands, unclasped them, turned her mirror bracelet.

He skimmed her treatment history: radiation, targeted lipid vesicles, focused ultrasound. The usual. "You've been to quite a few doctors."

She almost smiled. "Let's just say that I've exhausted the conventional avenues."

He nodded. Nothing unusual about that. "I'll need to do a scan."

"I . . . had one a few weeks ago."

"I know." Scans were expensive, and no insurance policy on earth covered his services. "Your body changes. Epithelium sloughs off; blood

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cells are replaced; neurons die. I need to understand your body down to the molecular level."

He blinked off his monitor and found himself staring at her face: it seemed a geometer's invention — softened acute angles and lean, uncluttered lines. It looked just slightly concave and a shade paler than he remembered.

She looked away and noticed the holo cube at the corner of the desk. In the cube a younger Greta sat in a garden with her knees drawn up. There was a distant look in her dark eyes, and her hair — longer then — was tied back severely. Poppies bloomed in the background.

Greta looked up again, said nothing. Their silence stretched.

"I don't want to raise your expectations," he said finally. "Molecular surgery is still a very limited technique, despite all the publicity it's been getting." It was his stock speech. Even he found it boring. "If there's a local molecular pathology, I can probably pinpoint it. If the defect is simple enough — a faulty codon in your DNA, say — I might be able to correct it. . . ."

Conrad ran out of disclaimers. He busied himself with her chart again. And blinked it off almost immediately.

"Your mother died of leukemia," he said, astonished.

They'd been lovers — however briefly — and she had never told him.

"Yes. I was six years old." Her voice was quiet and unmusical; she might have been speaking to herself. "I remember when she was near the end. My father was desperate. He tried everything. One of the miracle cures was out at the time — laetrile, was it? No, that was earlier. Interferon? Coderase? Something. You could only get it in Europe. My father wanted to go. I was very angry at him. It seemed so . . . undignified."

"Molecular surgery is hardly the same thimg as laetrile," Conrad said gently.

"No, of course not." She closed her eyes. "When do you want to do the scan?"

"Right now. Unless you'd like me to tell you more about the technique?"

"No. Thank you."

He hesitated. "Would you like to go out for some chocolate afterward? There's a nice café near here."

Her expression didn't change. "I'd better not. I have to get back to work."

He forced a smile. "All right."

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Conrad stood up and led her to a door behind his desk that opened to a warm machine smell. She changed into a crinkly green smock that left her arms and calves bare. He made himself look away and calibrate the scanner.

The bulky, cylindrical hood rose, and he positioned her beneath it. The start-up sequence cycled through. Displays scrolled; status lights flickered. The charged air shimmered for a moment; then, silently, and with infinite patience, the machine recorded the position of every atom in her body.

OTHER MOLECULAR surgeons employed staffs of assistants and technicians. Conrad had neither. He worked best alone.

He sat at his desk and prepared himself: slowed his breathing, darkened the room, opaqued the metaglass wall. His machine expanded to fill the universe. Nothing else fit; nothing else mattered. Even Greta was an abstraction for the moment, a data file embedded in coded crystals. He blinked on his corneal monitor, slid his hand into the data glove. His tree glowed a soft coronal blue.

Connectivity is everything.

However much the body may move or change, its topology remains very nearly constant. The heart always leads to the aorta; the aorta leads to the carotid artery, the carotid to the maxillary.

The problem of storing all the data necessary to describe a single human body is staggering. The problem of organizing and accessing that data is greater still. And the problem of editing it. . . .

He began, as always, with the circulatory system. He set his simulator for real-time visual display, and followed the blood flow out of her left ventricle and into the arch of the aorta. The resolution was coarse; each frame showed several centimeters of tissue.

His tree lit incrementally to show his progress. Through the external iliac artery and into the femoral. The passages narrowed. Conrad felt the pull of the blood, the urgent summons drawing it forward. He upped his magnification. The bloodstream changed from a viscous red jelly to individual cells crammed and tumbling as they rushed ahead.

Branching into a mircroscopic vessel, he abruptly froze the display. Ahead, wedged partway into a capillary wall, was a lumpy, malformed cancer cell. He zoomed up and skimmed over its membrane. Insanity bubbled beneath the surface — frenzied, unregulated growth.

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At maximum magnification, individual molecules were discernible. Row after row of green liposaccharide fibers rose like cornstalks above the membrane. A dozen or more abnormal proteins protruded from the interior as well — molecules that should have long ago marked the cell for destruction by the immune system. He cataloged each one.

His fingers moved crisply in the glove. He jumped back into the bloodstream, cruised through the femoral artery — a low-hanging limb on his tree. Then he was in the deep femoral, then the bone marrow.

He located a healthy cell and snaked through a nanometer-wide permease passageway into its serene interior. He floated down past pink Golgi vesicles and rumpled endoplastic reticulum into the nucleus. The chromosomes were unraveled, working.

He wasted a few minutes getting his bearings in the coils of DNA, then located the library of genes that assembled the immunoassassins — the antibodies and the T-cell receptors. Painstakingly, he checked each codon.

His fingers twisted, then stopped. One of the long-chain genes — number 167 out of three-hundred-odd variants in her library — was miscoded. A point mutation; one wrong base pair. That long chain could combine with short-chain proteins in a million different ways to form T-cell receptors — molecules that recognize cancer cells. He had the simulator build a few: wiggling, Y-shaped proteins that curled at one end in a peculiar, ineffectual way.

Conrad pushed himself away from his desk, punched up a cup of miso, and gulped it down steaming. He was very close.

He slipped his hand back inside the glove and performed a simple edit in the long-chain gene: a guanine for an adenine. The difference of a single atom. The knife-edge between life and death.

The simulator built another T cell. This time the receptor stood straight up, virile and alert. The cell had a glossy, bluish look, like a newly turned gun barrel. He set up the simulation: high magnification, full bandwidth. His other systems shut down one by one.

He opened a pore in a capillary and eased the T cell through. The cell bobbed slowly in an eddy for a moment, then the current swept it up. Red blood cells jostled like an unruly mob, but the T cell glided smoothly forward — a gentleman among the rabble. He imagined its silky voice: *Excuse me, sir; I'm in something of a rush.* A Black Maria. An avenging angel. A blood shark.

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The cell turned from the thoroughfare of the brachial artery into the narrow back alley of the radial recurrent. A nucleated cell loitered near the vessel wall. The T cell slid up against it.

Good evening, sir.

An insistently polite molecular handshake. The fit of tongue to groove, bolt to chamber. Every atom quiveringly alert, touching, searching . . . *no*, only the self-protein of a healthy cell. No cancer antigen. *Disengage.*

My apologies, sir. I thought you were someone I knew.

It glided again down the alley, to the dark far end. Another cell. The receptor probed, feeling . . . *there*, the self-protein again, twisting around and . . . *YES!!* The antigen molecule!

The receptor fired: a blinding rush of pure white hate. A web of protein fibers extended, drew the target closer. Gross, misshapen cellular morphology — a cancer cell, thrashing in the T-cell's fatal embrace. Enzymes streamed out.

Conrad leaned forward in his chair, his hand clenched inside the glove. "Die," he whispered. *"Die."*

The cancer cell heaved, then turned inside out, protoplasm spattering. Conrad exhaled, wiped sweat from his face. He pulled his hand out of the glove. The simulator display froze. The T cell was smeared with slime, triumphant, its receptor thrust brutally forward.

Greta was going to live.

Conrad blinked off the monitor, took a deep breath. The rest was routine — just some molecular assembler programming. . . .

She was going to live.

He could think about her again.

He could think about her coltishness, her elegant wasted motion. He could remember how her smock had touched her body, gliding across her slim hips and shoulders. . . .

He cleared the wall to let in the few lonely city lights. Thinking about Greta was narcotic; he couldn't stop easily once he'd begun. He looked at the holo cube. It captured so little of her energy or her power over him. He wished he had something better.

But, of course, he did.

His hands shaking, Conrad started up the simulator again. He pulled the view up and back until only her face was visible. It seemed to be cut

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from a flawless white stone. He washed some of the color from the display, to heighten the effect. He opened her eyes. Pulling back farther, the display showed her from head to foot. He started a global replacement of the paper molecules in her smock. Gradually, from the lower hem upward, her garment turned to smoke.

He sat perfectly still, not breathing.

His fingers moved of their own accord. They zoomed the display down and inward until it showed the inside of her heart. He moved out through the left ventricle, up the ascending aorta, through the arch, into the left common carotid. Then he took a new branch, into the internal carotid and through her skull.

Light flickered near the top of his tree, climbing through ever finer branches. He twisted through the middle cerebral artery, to within sight of the blood-brain barrier.

The crown of the tree pulsed, the fire so bright it left a convulsive green afterimage when he looked away. His stiffened fingers made one more jog. . . .

And the tree went black.

Conrad felt an elation possible only through exhaustion. He'd been up all night. The last of the programming had cycled through only a few minutes earlier.

Greta sat across the desk, dressed in a clinging spray-sweater, running her fingers through her hair. He couldn't stop looking at her. She seemed wary, afraid to ask what he'd found.

He took a deep breath. "I think I can help you, Greta. The problem appears to be a simple one. It's a slight genetic defect, easily correctible."

She wrapped her arms around herself — she probably didn't even realize she was doing it.

"I'd like to give you an injection, but you need to understand what it does." He stood up. "The injection contains a small number of molecular machines — virus derivatives — suspended in saline. The machines will find their way through your bloodstream to your bone marrow. Once there, they'll locate a few B-cell precursors, and inject a short DNA segment into each one, activate them. Those cells will then start making the agents — the T cells — that can fight your cancer effectively. They're what you've been missing."

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He sat down on the edge of the desk, very close to her.

"Those cells will clone themselves a billion times over in the next few days. Your body will regulate the process, ridding itself of the cancer at a rate you can tolerate, replacing the damaged tissue with healthy cells."

For a moment she looked vulnerable, even frightened.

"Is that all?"

He hesitated for a moment. "Yes. That's all."

She nodded slowly, her eyes averted, as if she were entering into something disreputable.

He gave her the injection. After a few minutes, she looked up at him, and her eyes turned as round as suns.

Greta had some bad habits. She put things down without thinking and never picked them up again. She found Conrad's aversion to clutter *quaint*.

None of that bothered him. On the contrary. Fond of everything she touched, he looked with affection at the half-empty wineglasses and folded-back magazines that piled up around the apartment. He found excuses to linger over tea in the morning until she left for work. He watched her for hours while she slept.

Their relationship had developed quickly. Conrad took her out to lunch after her second visit to his office. By unspoken agreement, they avoided the subject of their earlier affair — he suspected that she barely remembered it. A few days later, he moved into her apartment; his place was too small and sparsely furnished for her tastes. Conrad found his welcome there miraculous. Each time Greta stepped from the shower with a towel on her head or spoke impatiently to someone on the uplink, he was astonished at how completely she had accepted him into her life.

He adapted. He learned to like Greta's desert tones and her trendy oblate furniture. He even learned to enjoy the noisy restaurants she went to with her friends. He listened with a fixed smile while they discussed advertising and tax incentives. He tried not to say much — he always ended up talking about work when he did. Greta hated that. It reminded her of her illness, he decided. It reminded her of how much she needed his help.

Conrad tried to moderate his working hours. Still, he came home late too often. At the office, his cellular excursions still consumed him as passionately as ever, and he'd look up after what seemed a few minutes to

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find that half the evening was gone. He brought her small presents then: flowers, or something she could see her reflection in.

Once, he gave her a smoke-colored negligee. The sales system asked what her size was. He didn't know. It asked for her height. He didn't know that either. He didn't even want to guess. The tension in her posture, he suspected, made her seem taller than she really was. He went back to his office and retrieved her simulation from his files, animated it. The system computed her measurements to within a micron. She forgave him, that night.

The change in her was remarkable. After less than a month, her concavity and unsteadiness were gone. The vulnerability of a few weeks earlier was impossible to imagine.

He missed it a little.

CONRAD ARRIVED home so late one night that the sun was nearly up. He didn't feel tired even so. Greta was sitting up in bed accessing her corneal monitor. Tiny amber characters flickered across it — stock quotations, presumably. She drummed on the covers with her fingers.

"I've done something fantastic," he said.

She didn't answer.

"This fellow's vitreous humor turned cloudy — you know, the liquid in the eye. He couldn't see a thing. It turns out that his retina is secreting totally the wrong protein. It's precipitating out as a very fine particulate. I couldn't turn off the genes that were doing it — too many cells had the error — so I changed some other cells to secrete a protein that poisoned the reaction. . . ."

She blinked off her monitor and stared at him. "Are you finished?"

He nodded stupidly. It occurred to him that he hadn't brought her anything.

She reminded him about a dinner party they'd planned for the previous evening. "I called you a dozen times. Don't you check your messages?"

He didn't know what to say. He went into the living room and held his head in his hands. After a few minutes, she came out and sat next to him.

"What am I going to do with you?"

"You can be so muddleheaded. Like a child. I wonder what we have in common sometimes." She stood up and walked to the bar. "Don't you?"

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He shook his head violently. "No. Never."

She wasn't listening. "Is it just a physical thing with us?"

"Please don't say that."

She punched up a drink, took a long look at him. "I'm not going to sit here every night, knitting or whatever, waiting for you to come home. I'm not sure why I do it now."

She went back to the bedroom without waiting for an answer. He slept on the couch, as a sort of penance.

In the morning he moved quietly through the apartment, trying to be inconspicuous. He came up on her unexpectedly in her study, bent over a book and crying softly. He withdrew before she noticed him.

Two of Greta's friends from work left the table, laughing breathlessly. Conrad hadn't understood anything they'd been saying.

"What are we celebrating?" he asked.

Greta wore a nearly transparent batik blouse. Men at other tables stared openly. Waiters with slicked-back hair and Russian shirts circled like moons.

She laughed. "Our initial public offering. You don't know what that means, do you?"

He shook his head. "Tell me."

"Our stock is being offered for sale to the public for the first time. Big money. Fax coverage. Offering circulars embedded in holo cubes." She lifted her glass. "Champagne."

"Congratulations."

She shrugged. She looked calm and uncharacteristically still.

"You don't seem especially excited," he said.

"I'm not. It's anticlimatic, really. But there's a big reception at the office tomorrow evening. Can you get away?"

"I'll try, but I've got a simulation running — blood circulation in the brain. I think I can reverse the atrophy —"

She shook her head gently. "Don't talk about work."

"You were talking about work," Conrad said reasonably. He pushed his hair out of his eyes, leaned forward. "Greta, I wish you could feel what I feel. What it's like to travel in that world. I could hook you up to my simulator sometime, take you on a tour. . . ."

An orbiting waiter brought bread in an odd fluted basket.

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Greta started to say something, then stopped. Looking up, Conrad saw that she was crying. He groped for a handkerchief without success. Finally he handed her his napkin.

"Greta, are you all right?"

The waiter homed in, glaring at him. Conrad waved him away.

"What's the matter?"

She couldn't speak for a minute. She pointed at the bread.

"My mother had a basket like that. I haven't seen one like it in twenty-five years."

Was that all?

"You've never told me much about her," he said.

It took her another minute to recover. "I don't remember much — it's as if I had blocked out that part of my life. But I've been thinking about her a lot lately." She sighed. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "Don't be. I want to know you better."

She reached across the table, took his hand. "I want to . . . know myself better. I want to understand why I'm so happy." A tear traced the curve of her cheekbone. She paused for a long moment. "We've never talked about having children, Conrad."

He was taken aback. Children were alien creatures. They emitted noise and clutter.

"No, we haven't," he said. "Between my practice and you, I don't know how —"

She touched her fingers to his lips. "Just think about it."

Conrad came home early the next night. Greta was still at her reception. The apartment seemed terribly empty without her.

He tried to read, gave up, dusted the tables, paced in the living room. He looked at the door every time he heard a sound. After the dozenth time, he began to wonder if she was really coming home. She'd left him once before, without any warning. There was no reason to think she wouldn't leave again.

His pacing route expanded. One loop led to her study. Her desk was scattered, as usual, with piles of reports and coded crystals. In the center was something unexpected — a small book bound in silk with a Victorian flower pattern on the cover. A diary, in fact.

He resisted for a moment, then stopped and opened it to where the

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ribbon marked the latest entry — only the fourth or fifth; the book was new. Her handwriting was incongruously neat and girlish, and it occurred to him that he had never seen it before. He wondered if she was ashamed of it.

> *Conrad forgot about our dinner with Celia and Mike. I felt ridiculous explaining why he wasn't there. But — I hate saying this — I was more relieved than angry. Conrad is so unsure of himself around other people. He never smiles. Even so, I'm useless when he isn't here. Why does he have this effect on me?*

Conrad heard the door open. He shut the diary quickly. In the living room, Greta punched up a drink and unsealed her suit. Underneath was smooth skin and a slight sheen of perspiration. She stretched out on the couch.

"How was the party?" he asked.

She shrugged. "We spent all evening watching our stock go by on the ticker. We were up two points in the aftermarket."

She seemed so calm, he wondered if something was wrong.

"Juvenile, really. I left early — I kept thinking how much I'd rather be home with you. But I thought you were working late tonight. Why didn't you come?"

He shook his head. "Something happened today. I wouldn't have been much good at a party."

She looked concerned. "What was it?"

Conrad stood up, put his hands in his pockets. "I had a new patient in. He was an old man, at least eighty. Thirty years ago he crossed one of his business partners. I didn't follow the details, but his partner killed himself, apparently. My patient had a terrible time talking about it."

She put down her drink. She'd left an inch of liquid in the glass. "What did he want?"

"He figured his memory would start to fail as he grew older. But it hasn't; it's gotten sharper, more painful. He wants to forget about what he did to his partner. He wants me to help."

She raised her eyebrows. "Really?"

He walked over to the window, watched the crescent moon bleed color from the city below. "I could do it, you know. That's what disturbed me."

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She leaned forward. "How would you do that . . . make him forget?"

"It's easy." He spoke eagerly, encouraged by her interest. "I project an image of his partner onto his simulated retina. The rods and cones react to light. The optic nerve picks it up. Some processing happens there — image reconstruction, integration, filtering — then it travels into his brain. All I have to do is follow the connections."

He walked in a circle. "The brain's first job is to categorize the principal objects in the image — the man's partner, in this case. The recognition process is incredibly complex. But it always comes down to a simply connected net of neurons that manage the data tree for a particular object. Then I send one of my molecular machines through the blood-brain barrier. I have it pull the plug, unwrap the connections. There's an enzyme that does that — packed up in the dendrites. All my machine has to do is to stimulate exocytosis."

Greta's lips were parted slightly. "That's all?"

"That's all. He'd forget everything associated with his partner — probably including some business knowledge he'd rather keep. But I think he'd accept that. . . ."

Conrad stopped. He was talking too fast. And saying far too much.

Greta's face changed, the intrigued look turning inward. "You can change someone's *brain*!"

"Well, of course I can," he said, flustered. "I can change anything. I have all the data. All I have to do is edit it."

Her eyes went enormous and vacant. "You can change someone's brain?"

The warm flush that had started on her face when she first saw him drained to a chalky white.

"Greta, are you all right?"

She stood up, suddenly as unsteady as on the day she had first walked into his office. "Is that what happened to me?"

"What do you mean?"

He stepped toward her. She moved sideways, to keep the couch between them. She was breathing hard.

"Everything I've been feeling — the crying, waiting nights for you to come home . . . what did you do to me?"

He took another step toward her. She backed away.

"Answer me!"

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"Greta, calm down. You're hyperventilating."

"*Tell me!*"

His hands were shaking. He realized, far too late, that he didn't know how to lie to her. "It was nothing significant."

"What does that mean?"

"Greta, please. . . ."

She stared at him with huge, accusing eyes.

He looked down. "I sent a machine into your central nervous system. One machine the size of a virus. That's all."

She moved to a safe distance. "Go on."

"That's all, really. Your cancer was so simple. I had hours left over before you came back. So I showed your simulation a picture of me. It was just an experiment. I followed the impulses. I found the recognition center right away — I'd made a strong impression on you, whether you realized it or not. There was a path that led away from it straight into your thalamus: affection, pleasure — something strong. But there was a clump of inhibitor neurons wrapped around the center, firing full-time."

She looked ill. But she was listening.

"That was abnormal," he said. "Don't you see? It was pathological. Those inhibitors prevented you from feeling anything, prevented you from responding. They've been there for years — maybe since your mother died — I don't know. The repair was so easy. My machine bound up the transmitter they were secreting, turned off the inhibition. One machine, that's all."

Her breathing was the only sound he could hear.

She pressed her hands to her temples. "I have a *machine* inside my head?"

"No, of course not. It was flushed out weeks ago. You'd have needed an electron microscope to see the thing anyway. Greta, please understand. I didn't really change anything. The connections were all established. All I did was stimulate them. . . ."

Her face was deadly pale. She put her hand over her mouth and rushed out of the apartment.

AFTER AN hour, Conrad went looking for her, without success. The night passed, and the next morning he left, reluctantly, for work.

In the evening he came home to find the locks changed. There was a note on the door in her curiously feminine handwriting, ask-

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ing him to move back to his old apartment. He waited for an hour or more. She didn't come home. Finally he took her suggestion; he didn't know what else to do.

Conrad's apartment smelled musty and unused — he hadn't been there in several weeks. All the things he had brought with him to Greta's place were back, boxed and piled on the living room carpet. He left them where they were. The situation, he felt, was surely temporary.

He walked back to Greta's building and waited outside for her to come home. He replayed the previous evening endlessly in his head. Her face seemed to grow whiter each time, and his stupidity more incredible.

The wind picked up, wrapping leaves and discarded papers around his feet. He moved into the shelter of a doorway and stood there until dawn.

He called Greta's office in the morning, and again for several days afterward.

"I know she wants to speak to me," he'd say to her secretary. "She *has* to."

But Greta was never in, and she never returned his calls.

Conrad got in the habit of standing outside her building most evenings. Once, he ran into the woman who lived in the next apartment. She hadn't seen Greta in several days. She thought she might be out of town. He waited anyway, until the lights in the building faded and the street turned black and empty.

Gradually, he stopped seeing patients. He couldn't concentrate on his work. But he still went to his office every morning. He sat at his desk, stared at the holo cube of Greta, listened to the hum of the warm machines.

He retrieved her simulation from his files and animated it. He had her walk across the monitor wearing her green paper smock. He left the garment opaque, but he shortened it by a foot — it was more becoming.

Sometimes he made her dance.

He spent as little time as possible in his apartment. The pile of boxes still sat in the living room, unopened. He rarely bothered to answer the uplink, but one evening it buzzed persistently every few minutes. He picked it up the fourth or fifth time.

"Hello," he said. He hadn't heard his own voice in a long time. It sounded hollow and unfamiliar.

"Conrad?"

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"*Greta!*"

"How have you been?"

"Busy," he said after a minute. "Very busy."

"Working, of course." There was acid in her voice. "Conrad, I'd like you to stop standing in front of my apartment. I don't live there anymore. You're just wasting your time."

He held his breath. "Am I?"

"Yes, you are."

He wiped his forehead with a filthy shirt sleeve. "I'd like to see you, Greta."

She didn't answer for a moment. "No. That isn't why I called."

He let her continue.

"I met someone after you left —"

"After you locked me out." He wasn't bitter, exactly, but he saw no reason for inaccuracy.

Yes, after I locked you out. Someone at work — I don't think I'll mention his name. We've been seeing each other for the past two months."

He held the uplink very tightly. "Someone else? It can't be . . . the same with him."

She was silent for a minute. "No. It isn't. There isn't the closeness I had with you. It's never going to be like that again, is it?"

He couldn't answer.

"Conrad, is it?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

She began to cry.

"Please, Greta, let's meet somewhere. We can just forget that night —"

"Never," she said, very clearly. He could almost hear her shiver. "*Never.*"

"But I can *make* you forget." He was desperate now. "It would be so easy. I can do another scan. By tomorrow you won't remember —"

"Conrad, please. Stop. I called because . . . I wanted to thank you. For what you did to me. I'd never thought I'd say that, but it's true. I'm getting married next month."

He couldn't breathe. "Why?"

"I'm pregnant."

Conrad sat on his tatami, holding his uplink. At length he stood up and

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walked carefully to the door. His body felt fragile, almost transparent. He drove to his office.

The scanner took a long time to adjust. The mechanisms had drifted through disuse. He set it for automated recording and lay down on the dish-shaped table. It seemed terribly cold. He pulled the hood over his body and lay still while the machine ran.

His simulation's face had the gray, sunken look of a corpse. He hardly recognized it. The expression was blank. Conrad turned its lips upward, as an undertaker might, into a vacuous smile.

He projected an image of Greta in her green smock onto his simulation's retinas — the strongest stimulus he knew. The impulses traveled up the optic nerves to the visual cortex, and his brain turned incandescent.

He spent hours tracing the tangled paths. Greta had seeped into every dendrite and synapse. He began to understand the visceral reaction she evoked in him — his response to her reached deep into his hindbrain and his motor neurons.

The moon rose over the city, arced across the sky, and evaporated in the sunrise. He kept tracing, cataloging, following signals as they dipped into the neural background. The paths grew ephemeral in places; he worked by instinct, taking chances.

By noon he had an approximate map of his response. From within, it was intimidating — an impenetrable knot of connections. A kelp forest. But when he stepped back, a pattern began to emerge, and with it a strategy for programming his machines.

He was going to forget that Greta ever existed.

The city lights came on below. The sky turned the richest of blues. Conrad activated Greta's simulacrum for the last time. She walked across the room, stopped, looked up expectantly. The Conrad-simulacrum materialized in front of her, still with its empty smile. The two moved to within a few inches of each other. Slowly, chastely, their lips touched.

Their images began to fade as the coded crystals in their databases randomized. They became immaterial, like reflections in a pane of metaglass. They became ghosts. Then wisps of fog. Then nothing at all.

He imagined he could feel the transit of the machines through his body. They moved from the aorta through the left common carotid and the internal carotid. They approached the blood-brain barrier. The ma-

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chines were precursors. As soon as they crossed the barrier, they would replicate, locate specific neural pathways, go to work. The magnitude and delicacy of their task terrified him. He tried to feel confident in their success.

He tapped his fingers idly on his desk. He didn't feel fuzzy or absent-minded. He didn't feel anything at all. Could the machines have been destroyed by his immune system before they fulfilled their purpose? There was no way to know. All he could do was wait.

Conrad stood up and walked over to his tree, watched the patterns of light and shadow dance on its mirror limbs. Gradually, he felt as if an enormous weight were being lifted from his shoulders.

He shuffled back to his desk. He noticed a holo cube of an attractive young woman with an icy expression near one corner. She looked familiar, but he couldn't place her. For some reason his confusion delighted him.

Back in his apartment, Conrad found a pile of boxes in his living room, and a stink of unwashed clothes. He remembered vaguely that he'd been working particularly hard the previous few days. Obviously, he'd neglected everything else.

But that didn't explain the boxes.

He thought about calling the police, then decided not to. There were too many questions he couldn't answer.

By evening his apartment was orderly again. He punched up an enormous dinner and fell asleep, utterly exhausted. Waking up the next morning, he felt disoriented and clumsy, uncertain for a time of where he was. The feeling never entirely passed.

He drove to his office somehow. Arriving, he wandered unsteadily down three wrong corridors before he found his door. At least it seeemed to be his — it had his name on it — but the furnishings looked unfamiliar. He was most curious about the sculpture in the far corner, a tree with silver leaves and a crown of flame. He took a step toward it, and toppled.

He sat, dazed, on the floor, uncertain of how to get up. He couldn't make his legs move. He shook his head, trying to clear the fog. Was he having a stroke? No. He didn't have any other symptoms. He was conscious; he wasn't paralyzed.

He needed help. He was sure of that much.

There was an uplink on the desk behind him. He tried to get to his knees, succeeded for a moment, then tangled his feet and fell again.

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He dragged himself along on his elbows and pulled his chest up to the edge of the desk. The effort was excruciating. He reached for the uplink, but his hand refused to close around it. He concentrated on one finger at a time, thinking about what each muscle was doing.

After a minute, three of his fingers curled loosely around a cylindrical object. He dragged it toward him, feeling a ragged satisfaction that ended in confusion. What was this thing? What was he supposed to do with it?

Abruptly, his arms gave way, and he fell heavily to the floor.

He heard a crash beside him — he must have knocked something off the desk. Fragments of a broken box lay scattered around him. Each fragment had the same fuzzy image on it. The largest piece was the clearest. It showed a young woman staring out at him with chilling indifference.

Conrad looked up again. He faced a long, clear wall. His eyes burned — they were drying out. He couldn't remember how to close them. His view of the dark, blocky shapes in front of him splintered and faded, blackened.

Time passed.

The world shrank to a Greta-shaped darkness, an absence of memory and neural pathways that defined her as absolutely as a black circle of occluded stars reveals the new moon. He'd gotten her tangled up with everything, he realized — with his work and his heartbeat, with the ebb and flow of air through his lungs. He couldn't forget her without destroying himself.

The Greta-shape flickered, and for a moment, he saw his mirror-tree etched clearly against the faded city, mocking him with its message of connectivity.

Then he forgot how to breathe.

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INDEX TO VOLUME 79, JULY-DECEMBER 1990

Aldridge, Ray: *We Were Butterflies* ..... Aug. 65
Arno, Ed: Cartoon ..... Nov.
Asimov, Isaac: Science:
At The Edge ..... July 133
The Greatest Conquest ..... Aug. 123
Target: Earth ..... Sept. 135
Out Of The Typewriter, Endlessly Writing ..... Oct. 134
The Invention Of The Devil ... Nov. 124
Trapping The Rainbow ..... Dec. 131
Brin, David: *Dr. Pak's Preschool (novelet)* ..... July 6
Budrys, Algis: Books ..... July, Aug., Oct., Nov.
Stephen King (article) ..... Dec., 44
Burt, Katharine Newlin: *Herself* ..... Aug. 35
Card, Orson Scott: Books To Look For ..... July-Dec.
Cassutt, Michael: *Curious Elation* Sept. 146
Chadwick, Paul: Cover for *"Four Kings And An Ace"* ..... November
Competition #51 Report ..... Nov. 159
Cook, Paul: *Master Of The House (novelet)* ..... Sept. 91
Cross, Ronald Anthony: *All The Way To Teelee Town (novelet)* ..... Sept. 5
Reflection In A Window ..... Dec. 124
Davidson, Avram: *Mr. Rob'T E. Hoskins* ..... Nov. 103
De Filippo, Marsha: *Stephen King: Bibliography* ..... Dec. 56
Denton, Bradley: *Jimmy Blackburn Flies A Kite* ..... Oct. 116
Di Filippo, Paul: *The Boot* ..... Dec. 109
Ellison, Harlan: *Harlan Ellison's Watching* ..... July, Sept., Oct.
Farmer, Philip Jose: *One Down, One To Go* ..... Oct. 104
Farris, Joseph: Cartoons ..... July, Sept., Oct.
Finch, Sheila: *Cyberella (novelet)* ..... July 110
Frazier, Robert: *Blood Simple (verse)* ..... Sept. 30
Friesner, Esther M. *Whammy (novelet)* ..... July 71
Garcia y Robertson, R.: *Four Kings And An Ace (novelet)* ..... Nov. 6
Gregory, Daryl: *In The Wheels' (novelet)* ..... Aug. 99
Griffin, Peni R.: *Dammery Mica* .. Sept. 55
Haber, Karen: *His Spirit Wife* .... Aug. 82
Hardy, David: Cover for *"In The Upper Cretaceous With The Summerfire Brigade"* ..... August
Harris, S.: Cartoons ..... July, Sept.
Heath, Mark: Cartoon ..... October
Johnson, Bill: *Vote Early, Vote Often* ..... Sept. 122
Jonik, John: Cartoons ..... Aug., Nov.
Keizer, Gregg: *Days Of Miracles And Wonder (novelet)* ..... Aug. 139
Kessel, John: *Invaders (novelet)* ... Oct., 6
King, Stephen:
The Moving Finger ..... Dec. 8
The Bear ..... Dec. 61
Koja, Kathe: *Reckoning* ..... July 143
Kraus, Stephen: *Behind The Barrier* ..... Dec. 141
Kunz, Anita: Cover for *"The Moving Finger"* ..... December
Martin, Henry: Cartoons ..... Aug., Sept., Nov.
Morressy, John: *The Three Wishes* ..... Aug. 53
Newman, S.: *Vindolanda In Winter* ..... Dec. 96
Nourse, Alan E.: *What A Place The World Would Be* ..... July 93
O'Donnell, Kevin, Jr.: *The Pieces Of The Puzzle* ..... Nov. 110
Platt, Charles: *Inside Science Fiction* ..... July 65
Reed, Robert: *Bushwacker* ..... Nov. 74
Resnick, Mike: *Frankie The Spook* ..... Oct. 89
Responses To "Just Say No!" ... Aug. 133
Roberts, John Maddox: *Skinsuit* ..... Nov. 59
Rusch, Kristine Kathryn: *Inspiration* ..... Nov. 91
Schenck, Hilbert: *A Down East Storm* ..... Oct. 144
Schomburg, Alex: Cover *"Queen Mary" Spaceship* ..... October
Smith, Terry: Cover for *"All The Way To Teelee Town"* ..... September
Sterling, Bruce: *Hollywood Kremlin (novelet)* ..... Oct. 61
Tepper, Sheri S.: *The Gazebo* ..... Oct. 36
Tritten, Larry: *Crossweird Puzzle* ..... Aug. 96
Walotsky, Ron: Cover for *"Dr. Pak's Preschool"* ..... July
Watson, Ian: *In The Upper Cretaceous With The Summerfire Brigade (novelet)* ... Aug. 4
Whitlock, Dean: *The Fax Man* ... Sept. 69
Wightman, Wayne: *The King Of The Neanderthals* ..... Nov. 134
Winston-Macauley, Marnie: *The Perfect Solution (novelet)* ..... Sept. 31
Wright, Gary: *The Teller Told A Tale* ..... July 49

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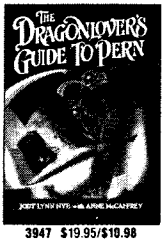

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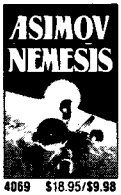

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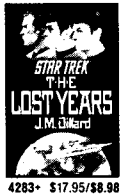

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